

Preaching on the Olympics – Trinity 8 2012

II Kings 4<sup>42-44</sup> p372, Psalm 145<sup>10-19</sup>, Ephesians 3<sup>14-21</sup> p1175, John 6<sup>1-21</sup> p1069

So what's it all about? What does it all mean? Why all this razzmatazz? What's so special about an international sporting festival? Why spend all this money? Why put up with all this disruption? What are so many people getting so excited about? You personally may or may not be excited by the Olympics, but it's clear that millions of people are. So what's it all about?

Play is a pretty basic instinct. Many young animals play. Biologically speaking, play is the way young animals tone up their muscles and learn to coordinate their bodies in preparation for their adult lives when they will have to feed and defend themselves. It looks like fun even for lambs and calves and foals, even though of course we can't possibly know how it feels to be a sheep, a cow or a horse or what they're really thinking. Most animals grow out of playing as they get older – though adult carnivores are more likely to carry on playing than adult herbivores. They have more need to keep up their skills. Adult dogs play, but then basically a dog is a wolf that has never grown up. Adult primates play. And human beings play more than any other animal. Biologically speaking, human games were probably originally about the young men of the tribe practising for hunting and fighting. Just think what skills are involved in most sports even today. This may be the reason why traditionally sport has been more a male than a female thing and it is only now, when men and women increasingly compete on equal terms in other areas of life, that women's sport is being treated rather more seriously – though there is long way to go before it is given equal esteem, if that is what we think is desirable. We watch sport to encourage our elites and to be inspired ourselves to make greater efforts.

The ancient Greeks were famous for their love of games. *Mens sana in corpore sano* – a healthy mind in a healthy body - was their slogan translated into Latin. Their finest athletes competed every four years in the Olympic Games, during the period of which a truce was observed in the otherwise incessant petty wars between the rival Greek city states. There were other games too and Greek men generally were enjoined to stay fit physically for the benefit of their mental or psychological well-being as well as for the good of their physical health. The ancient Romans too loved the Games. The biblical tradition is rather less positive about playing games. There is very little about playing games in the Bible. That doesn't necessarily mean that the ancient Hebrews and the early Christians didn't play games. That seems very unlikely, but the biblical authors didn't feel the need to describe the commonplace, to write down what everybody knew about anyway. The only game I can find in the Old Testament is in II Samuel 2 where a mock battle tragically turns into one of the early skirmishes of a civil war between northern and southern Israel. In the New Testament, I think, only St Paul refers to athletic contests. He reminds the Corinthians that professional runners train hard to win a prize which is essentially meaningless, an evergreen wreath which will soon wither and, anyway, only one can win it. By contrast, he says, we Christians can all win our race and the prize is eternal life. So we ought not to strive any less strenuously to follow Jesus than professional athletes strive to run faster than their competitors. He also tells Timothy: *Bodily exercise profiteth little: but godliness is profitable unto all things, having promise of the life that now is, and of that which is to come.*

Generally speaking Jews and Christians didn't like the Graeco-Roman Games. For one reason they were held in honour of pagan gods. (There is still a hint of something quasi-religious about the Olympics, especially perhaps in the torch ceremony. The flame comes from the traditional abode of the Greek gods on Mount Olympus and to some people it seemed like sacrilege when runners advertised their torches on a bay.) The Greeks competed in the Games naked – which Jews and Christians thought was immodest and likely to lead to immorality. The Roman Games degenerated into ever more ingenious methods of torturing people to death in the arena, including of course, persecuted Christians. So the people of God kept apart from the pagan games as far as they could.

In the Dark and Middle Ages, there was a sort of love/hate relationship between the Church and popular sports and entertainment. On the one hand, games and entertainment could be an aspect of religious festivals: something for people to have fun doing when life was generally *nasty, brutish and short*, an opportunity to enjoy practising skills needed in daily life and an opportunity for the Church to tell people the Gospel story. On the other hand, there was always the fear that popular pastimes would degenerate into drunken sex and violence. Anyway, for the serious minded, playing games was a waste of the limited time on earth which God had given you to prepare for heaven.

It was in the C19 that the Church really began to promote sport. *Muscular Christianity* it was called. The Duke of Wellington is often quoted as having claimed that the Battle of Waterloo was won on the playing fields of Eton. This is probably apocryphal, but it is certainly true that games played a big part in the reformation of the public school system inspired by Thomas Arnold Headmaster of Rugby. The Victorian public schools rediscovered *Mens sana in corpore sano* with a vengeance. Physical fitness was important but what was most important about it was the effect physical fitness was believed to have on character. Playing team games taught boys to play by the rules. It taught them to work together, putting the interests of the team before their own selfish interests. Hard physical sports encouraged endurance and the ability to overcome discomfort, pain and fear. The public school ethos ideally taught a boy to play the game, to give it everything he'd got and then still to congratulate the boy who beat him because he was faster, stronger, smarter or just luckier. It was the taking part, not the winning that counted. You can easily see how these values meshed with a particular understanding of Christian values – unselfishly taking up your cross to follow Jesus wherever He leads, playing by the rules even when you lose out by doing so, putting the welfare of all before your own safety and profit. Of course it's by no means the whole Christian Gospel and it seems highly unlikely that every Victorian public schoolboy was a saint in the popular meaning of the word. It is, however, well worth rereading *Tom Brown's Schooldays* as a digest of what men like Arnold hoped to achieve.

I'm well aware that I've said nothing about girls and women who didn't much feature in Victorian muscular Christianity or about that majority of the population who didn't experience a public school education – or any formal schooling at all. The Victorian Church did, however, see the value of sport for the poor. It kept them off the streets. It diverted them from less salubrious ways of passing their time. Potentially sport could confer on the poor all the benefits it was believed to confer on the elite – the building of character, self-

respect, respect for the rules, respect for others, a willingness to subjugate the self to the collective, the determination to carry on in the face of disappointment or pain. Victorian Christians founded many sports clubs, plenty of which are still in existence although most of them no longer have any formal connections with organised religion. He is almost a cliché, the young curate who, having excelled at sport at school and university, opened a boys' club in some slum district of town where only a very few of the boys escaped poverty by becoming professional sportsman but a lot more learned to respect their bodies, smoked and drank less, exercised more, avoided petty crime and generally made themselves more employable and better husbands and fathers than they might otherwise have become.

On the other hand, there were still in Victorian times those Christians who believed that games were a waste of the time and energy that God had given us to work at something useful and productive and to prepare for eternity. The legacy of this view tends to be that you can't play games just for fun. It has to be to get fit physically or to build character. The Olympics have to have a legacy whether in increasing ordinary people's participation in sport nationally or in regenerating the economy of East London. The puritan won't let us have an Olympic extravaganza just for the fun of it. I suggest, however, that this is a mistake. Joy is an end in itself. Joy doesn't have to be justified as a means to an end and neither does joy have to be deserved or earned. A sports economist explained on the radio this week that, as a proportion of our national wealth, any economic gain or loss the Olympics might bring to Britain is negligible. Just enjoy the games, he said. As for ordinary people taking part in sport themselves, punishing routines and no *pain no gain* attitudes are likely to be counterproductive. Don't join a gym you don't go to or promise yourself gruelling ten miles runs several times a week in all weathers. If you don't enjoy them, you won't do them. Far better a regular stroll around the park which you do actually enjoy or some gardening. If you walk instead of taking a short car journey, you not only improve your physical fitness. You save money. You're doing your bit from the environment. You are more likely to meet people and talk to them. You'll probably enjoy the places you pass through more. Joy is an end in itself. Jesus said : *These things have I spoken unto you, that my joy might remain in you. And that your joy might be full.* St Paul says: *Rejoice in the Lord always.*

In the C20 sport and the Church rather went their separate ways. Quite rightly there was a reaction against Victorian muscular Christianity. The followers of Thomas Arnold got a lot right, but theirs was only part of the picture. Christianity is multi-faceted. God cannot be contained in any human system no matter how well thought out. Aspects that might be overlooked by muscular Christians are such as these. *God is no respecter of persons.* We can therefore neither idolise elites nor patronise the poor. We are saved by God's grace, not by our own striving. *My strength is made perfect in weakness.* Our physical bodies are not insignificant but they are very far from the most important thing about us. Being beautiful to look at or an elite sportsman doesn't make you any dearer to God than someone who is less attractive, only averagely fit or actually diseased or disabled and you and I ought to look on other people as God looks on them and to love them just as they are. I find it a great comfort that God loves me just as I am.

During the course of C20, the Church has somehow managed to appeal increasingly to older people rather than younger and to women rather than men with the result that Church congregations tend to be less sport-minded than society in general. Sports clubs have felt the need to downplay their Christian foundations in order to appeal to a more secular and multicultural society. The transfer of children's sport to Sunday mornings which occurred about 20 years ago has created a battle between sport and Church for young people's attention which the Church seems to be doing a good job of losing.

On the other hand, some churches recently have recognised the potential of sport as an opportunity to reconnect with the world. *Christians in Sport* in its various incarnations has used the fact that some of our sporting heroes are faithful Christians to show that faith is cool. Some Christians who find that as athletes they have become celebrities and roll models are prepared to use their position to proclaim the Good News of Jesus Christ to sporting audiences. Sports audiences are made up of young adults, young men, the very people we find it hardest to attract into our churches. If they can see authentically that the people they admire have given their lives to Jesus Christ it is reasonable to pray that they too will take up their cross and follow Him.

More broadly, churches have provided hospitality for athletes at all levels of attainment, for spectators at sporting events, for people coming from abroad to share in international events such as the Olympics. This hospitality is a good thing in itself and it doesn't need any other justification. It is a pastoral opportunity and that is enough but it may present an opportunity for us to say something about what Jesus means to us and that is better still.

Sport has an enormous influence in the world today. There are millions of spectators and millions more of people who participate in sport at every level from the school playground to the Olympic stadium. Supporters are passionate about their heroes and their teams. Sport is a multimillion pound industry. Sportsmen and women become celebrities and roll models. Bodies like the International Olympic Commission tell even governments what to do. Sport is an enormous force and, like so many other human activities, it has a tremendous capacity for good and a tremendous capacity for evil. If the Church of God really cares about the world which God so loved that He sent His only-begotten Son, the Church cannot stand aloof from a phenomenon which has such a huge impact on the lives of so many millions of people. There is much good in sport to be supported and encouraged by Christian people. There are caveats and downright evils to which the Church must be alert and to which she must be ready to respond. I'm always cautious about jumping on bandwagons but, if we really believe what we say in the Creeds, there is no area of human life which is not our concern. If we are unconcerned about the world then we are irrelevant to the world. You and I and people like us make up the Church. We're all different, with different gifts and different opportunities. We respond in different ways to the opportunities the world presents, including the opportunities presented by the Olympics. But, whatever our response to the world is, if we are Christians, our response has to be the response of the Body of Christ, the One Whom God sent into the world because He so loved the world.