

What Kind of Life?

Like many of you, I enjoyed very much the recent Olympic games – even if it meant some nights staying up well past my usual bedtime! There were amazing feats of athleticism, built on years of dedication and practice. Compelling stories were told of difficulties overcome and sacrifices made, not only by the athletes but also by their families. It was heartbreaking to watch when, on occasion, a single misstep derailed a lifetime of preparation.

These athletes displayed a single-mindedness of purpose, a dedication to reaching a goal. In some ways, this is what Jesus had in mind with his call to take up our cross and follow him. Although we are blessed to know that in grace a single misstep will not deny us the gold, and to know that we do not have to *earn* our goal, yet there is a similarity between the dedication and effort of the Olympic athlete and the Christian life as we are called to live it.

Curiously enough, it was a quote from John Calvin which started my thoughts in this direction. Although Calvin lived in a time centuries removed from either the ancient Olympics or the modern games, he wrote this:

“In ancient times vast numbers of people, to obtain a simple crown of leaves, refused no toil, no pain, no trouble; nay, it even cost them nothing to die, and yet every one of them fought for a peradventure, not knowing whether he was to gain or lose the prize. God holds forth to us the immortal crown by which we may become partakers of his glory. He does not mean us to fight a haphazard, but all of us have a promise of the prize for which we strive. Have we any cause, then, to decline the struggle? Do we think it has been said in vain, ‘If we die with Jesus Christ we shall also live with him’? Our triumph is prepared, and yet we do all we can to shun the combat.” Some things stay the same – we have athletes – and other professions – who will

give all they have, all their energy, time, and effort, to succeed in their chosen fields, yet we as Christians, as persons chosen by God to live as witnesses to God's mercy and grace, so often decide that the challenge is too great, the cross is too much to carry.

Years ago there was a popular song, "Fifty Ways to Leave Your Lover". I thought of this song as I considered this passage on taking up your cross, on seeking to save your life only to lose it. There must be not fifty ways, but fifty thousand ways to lose your life without physically dying.

We can be so caught up in ambition that we lose sight of who we are, what is important. We can be so envious of others that we fail to appreciate what we have. We can be bitter about disappointments or expect perfection. We can become slaves to a wide variety of imaginary entitlements – imaginary and elusive. As we sense them slipping away we struggle to hold fast to what we have become convinced are necessities, and in the process we lose life, the truly abundant life which God gives us in Christ who took up the cross for us.

It is the eyes of the world which see the taking up of the cross as a burden, as failure and death. All too often even Christians have portrayed this call as one to a life of deprivation, of constant "thou shalt not's".

Too often the cross is seen as a trial which God inflicts upon us, some misery which is being used to test our character. I have to tell you that every time I hear, 'God never sends us a burden too great for us to bear', no matter how well meant or comforting I know it is meant to be, I have to say that the thought goes through my mind, "I wonder if the person to whom this is addressed is left with the impression that maybe this stern God has miscalculated." The

problem with this platitude is that it suggests that God is the source of the burden rather than the source of the strength in carrying the burden.

We find a similar misconception with the cross. The cross and death were not the imposition of God on Jesus to test his obedience or to strengthen his faith. The cross was the response of a broken, sinful world to the call of God to humanity to repent and to be made whole. That Jesus took up the cross, suffered for our sins, and broke the power of death through his own death and resurrection, is the act and grace of God. To take up this ministry in Christ's name is to take on the enmity of the world, to anticipate the rejection, the laying on of a cross by the world, to accept the humiliation and ridicule of a world that refuses to believe that God's love and redemption are real. It is also to share in Christ's ministry of hope and reconciliation in the world.

Seen in this way the cross itself is a symbol of brokenness, of the sinfulness of the world, but the *taking up of the cross*, instead of being something done reluctantly or with a resigned attitude, becomes the opportunity to respond to sinfulness in a different, God-filled, hope-filled way.

Taking up one's cross is to challenge the power of sin to defeat the good; it is to deny hatred the ability to cancel love. Taking up one's cross in love and in hope, is to proclaim the glory and righteousness of Jesus Christ who from his cross prayed, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do." It is to take up the burdens of injustice, illness, suffering, crises of all kinds, with the knowledge that Jesus Christ stoops beside us so that our burdens rest upon him. God does not give us a burden heavier than we can bear because God does not rain down evil upon us, and God does not leave us to shoulder our burdens alone.

This is difficult to understand and even more difficult to live. In following Jesus Christ, we are called not only to shoulder our own crosses, not only to take the weight of the evils brought about by our own sins and those whose sins impact us, but we are also called to shoulder the burdens of one another, of our family and friends, of the stranger, even of our enemies. This can become complicated.

The recent capture of Radovan Karadzic, a Serbian leader wanted in connection with the horrific killings in Bosnia over a decade ago, brought to mind my thoughts at the time of the atrocities. As I considered what he and Slobodan Milosevic were accused of doing, I prayed that each would see the enormity, the cruelty, the sinfulness of what had occurred. Then I questioned whether this was a loving prayer. Surely facing the pain and suffering which had been inflicted, accepting that such horror was not simply an expected part of war, and acknowledging one's own part in that horror, must give unspeakable pain to an individual. Was it right to ask that anyone experience such agony? Yet immediately there was a startled recognition of the exquisite conundrum of grace. Assuming they were guilty of the things of which they were accused, if these men were to face the truth, the honest truth, of their actions, the harsh reality of their sinfulness would be matched by the astounding grace of our redemptive God. For a second time I questioned whether or not I really wanted this for these two men. Yet, if I did not want this grace for them, could I truly believe that God will remove any burden of sin from me – where would come the cut-off line for grace, and where would I fall on that line?

To take up our cross is not easy. It is first to accept that we ourselves have sinned, and that Jesus Christ has taken our sins upon himself. It is to do more than understand, it is to live

as forgiven people, facing the ridicule and rejection of those who value self-sufficiency and self-justification, living according to their own standards than to God's. Taking up the cross is remembering that we have this life of grace not because we deserve it, but because God lovingly gives it. While it may not be easy, it is certainly easier than living life without Christ, without the hope which Christ brings.

One more analogy with the Olympics comes to mind. In some of the many interviews and stories about Michael Phelps, Olympic swimmer who won eight gold medals this year, his breakfast diet was reviewed. A typical breakfast for Mr. Phelps includes:

- Three fried egg sandwiches with cheese, lettuce, tomatoes, fried onions, and mayonnaise
- A five-egg omelet
- A bowl of grits
- Three slices of French toast with powdered sugar
- Three chocolate pancakes
- Two cups of coffee

Now as many commentators were quick to point out, this is not a diet recommended for the average person. Mr. Phelps also swims well over five miles a day, including practice and speed laps. The point, however, is that without this intake of food, he would not have the energy or strength to perform in the pool the way he does.

Our spiritual life is the same. We cannot expect to take up our cross with any of the hope or love which Christ commands, if we do not first feed ourselves, regularly and fully, on the spirit of God in Christ. When we yoke our cross with Christ, walking beside him, living in his love, taking up the cross ceases to be a burden, becoming instead the privilege of serving alongside Christ. Filled with God's grace, we cannot imagine life –with all its joys as well as sorrows, without this hope. Energized with the Spirit, we are propelled, not merely compelled, into a life of service with Christ.

Take up your cross with thanksgiving, that Christ carries it with you, that you have been invited to share God's grace with others!