

Commonwealth Games Month at St Pauls

5th March 2006

Welcome to Commonwealth Games month at St Pauls. As you can see, we have had a bit of trouble selling every ticket for every event, but Ken is still working with McDonalds on getting more corporate seats taken up.

Yes, this month is Commonwealth Games month at St Pauls. Over the next four weeks we're having a series of talks on sporting themes.

This week, I have been asked to talk on the theme, "Qualifying and Competing with a Purpose and a Plan." Next week, Ken will talk about "training for success." Followed by David Ayliffe on "Competing in the Big Event" and then in the grand final, Ken will do "Winning Gold!"

Naturally, with such a sporting theme at St Pauls this month, we have chosen three of St Paul's most famous and accomplished sportspeople to give these addresses. I know, you are saying how can three men with so much girth and so little hair be considered sportspeople? Well, while it is a little revealed fact these days, in the past all of us have had glorious sporting achievements. For example, during his school years David excelled as string changer on the yo-yo squad. And Ken played rugby at school. His official position was left right out.

Actually, the only way I got into a representative sporting team at school was to volunteer to keep the scoresheet. But I did play rugby in the Chermside Methodist team for a couple of seasons. They started by hiding me away at full back but they moved me to second row after a few games in which I excelled in dropping the ball after an opposition kick. Had they given a prize for it at the annual awards supper, I would have got the award for most knock-ons from opposition up and unders.

Although I do recall one game as full back when I did catch the ball cleanly. I was so mesmerised with surprise at my achievement that I failed to notice the opposition front rower looming up on me. He was about the size of Toyota Land Cruiser and hit me so hard I was surprised no air bags popped out of the ground. They reckon you could hear the air rushing out of my chest a couple of blocks away. Whoomph!

All this brings me to the first point I'd like to make. And that is, about qualifying. Even if you were a permanent bench member of the 7th reserves basketball team, you can still play in God's game. No-one is excluded.

In our reading this morning, St Paul is comparing our Christian life with a sporting competition. He says,

You've all been to the stadium and seen the athletes race. Everyone runs; one wins. Run to win. All good athletes train hard. They do it for a gold medal that tarnishes and fades. You're after one that's gold eternally. I don't know about you, but I'm running hard for the finish line. I've giving it everything I've got. No sloppy living for me! I'm staying alert and in top condition. I'm not going to get caught napping, telling everyone else all about it and then missing out myself.

When Paul wrote this to the Christians in Corinth in Greece, we can be certain his readers knew what he was talking about. Because Corinth, in those days, was the site of the second most important games competition in the world. These games were called the Isthmian games, because it was held on the isthmus of Corinth. If you look at a map of Greece you will see that Greece is almost divided into two parts. The southern land mass is connected to the northern land mass by a narrow neck of land. It's less than 10 kilometres across. This is called the Isthmus of Corinth. On west side is Korinthos, and on the east side is Isthmia. And from about 600 years before Paul wrote to the Corinthians, they held their games there every two years. The Isthmian Games.

Personally, I am very grateful that the modern Olympic Games are based on the games from the town of Olympia rather than the Isthmian Games. Can you imagine how hard it would be for some Europeans to pronounce Isthmian? Some of them can't even pronounce Syd-en-ey!

Anyway, when Paul says to the Corinthians "You've all been to the stadium and seen the athletes race" they would all answer *yes. Every two years, mate, at the Isthmian Games.*

And they would have already known one important fact about the Isthmian Games that Paul does not need to explain to them. He says, "Everyone who competes in the games goes into strict training." Although anyone could enter, not everyone qualified for the actual race. You see, it was a condition of entry at the Isthmian Games that the athlete undertook 10 months of compulsory training. If you didn't do the training, you didn't get to race. And Paul is suggesting that we should think about our Christian life in the same way.

Yes, you can enter for free. Anyone can sign up. God's grace is free for everyone. You don't have to be Ian Thorpe to enter. But free entry brings with it some responsibility to take the games seriously. Free entry into the Grace of God brings with it some responsibility. Or, so Paul suggests, it should.

And I think this is the first important point Paul wants us to think about. How are we equipping ourselves to live effective Christian lives? Are we in training? Are we doing the hard yards?

Just because God can use anything we have, doesn't mean we should give him just anything to use.

If you'll forgive a little judgementalism on my part, I do see Christians who think the whole of the Christian life is summed up and completed in one decision. One moment of conversion. A decision to accept Jesus Christ as Lord of my Life. Friends, this is just the sign-up. This is just the entry form. Christian life only BEGINS at conversion. Christian life only BEGINS when we say "Yes, I accept Jesus into my heart."

Paul is saying, "OK, you've signed on for the games, now I'd like to see you here every Sunday at 8/10 for training. And we'll do ten laps on Wednesday night at a Life Group. And I want you to do 3 laps every morning by yourself. And we'll need you for group work three times a month."

Just because God can use anything we have, doesn't mean we should give him just anything to use.

Of course, our unwillingness to put in the training for Christian living is not exactly a modern phenomenon. A story is told that Jesus took his disciples up the mountain and gathered them around him. He taught them, saying:

"Blessed are the poor in spirit for theirs is the Kingdom of heaven,

Blessed are the meek,

Blessed are they that mourn,

Blessed are the merciful,

Blessed are they who thirst for justice,

Blessed are you when persecuted,

Blessed are you when you suffer,

Be glad and rejoice for your reward is great in heaven."

Then Simon Peter said, "Do we have to write this down?"

and Andrew said, "Are we supposed to know this?"

and James said, "Will we have a test on this?"

and Bartholomew said, "Do we have to hand this in?"

and John said, "The other disciples didn't have to learn this!"

and Matthew said, "What does this have to do with real life?"

Well, it's only a story. But it's a familiar one, isn't it? Do we really have to work to understand what it is God wants from us? Do we really have to study? Do we have to be theologians? It's so much easier to rest on our conversion moment. It's easier than it is to persist in keeping our form good, our bodies fit, our minds alert. But Paul is urging us to think of the Christian life like athletes. It is a life of constant training. It's not just about signing on: And it's not even about getting fit: it's about keeping fit.

A few weeks ago in this church, Gavin talked to us about ways we might study the Bible. I confess I thought I was going to hear "same old, same old." I mean, I have been sitting in church most Sundays for nearly 60 years. I've heard more than one preacher suggest ways I might read the Bible. And, I suppose it's some small credit to me, that I have tried pretty much all of them. And found them useful. But because we are growing and developing human beings, one method does not last a life time. If it did, then Scripture Union would only need to publish one kind of Bible study notes. For a number of years I journalled and found it a very enriching way to interact with the Bible. During the time we lived in Hong Kong I wrote and shared a daily devotion for the staff. Probably this bored the staff to death, but I found it a wonderful discipline.

Anyway, back to Gavin. He's suggesting different ways to do Daily Devotions, and I'm ticking them off. *Yeah, Gav. Been there. Done that.* Then he talks about reading the Bible cover to cover. From Genesis 1:1 to Revelation 22:21. And I realised I had never done that—Read the Bible cover to cover. Next day, I read the first two chapters of Genesis. Of course, I had read them before. I don't know, thousands of times, probably. Pretty soon I was seeing how interesting it is to read the book this way. I began to think about how passages linked within one another. How they relate to the whole. What is the meta-language of the Bible above the words and verses? What is God saying as a whole as well as in particular. I'm up to Leviticus now. Which isn't exactly the funn-est book in the Bible. But it is far from uninteresting. Thanks Gav.

The point is—don't stop the training. Let's give God our best. And that means keeping up the training. It means turning up for practice. It means preparing ourselves for worship. I don't walk in here this morning without having thought about what I should say. In fact, I have thought about it, prayed about it, written, and rewritten for weeks. I know it may not show...

Paul says, "All the runners run, but only one wins the prize. Run in such a way to get the prize."

If the first thing Paul wants us to understand is that we should be in constant training, the second thing is that we need to have a goal in mind. We need to know where we are going. We need to run to get the prize.

Too many people aim at nothing, and hit it.

If you don't know where you are going, any road will do.

Paul says we ought to be clear about what the prize is. What the goal of life is. The winner at the Isthmian games got a laurel wreath to wear on his head. That's what Paul means by "a crown that will not last." It is a literal statement Paul is making. The crown that the Isthmian athlete won lasted a day or two at most. Then it was dead and gone.

But "we do it," says Paul, "to get a crown that last forever."

This ought to be our goal, to live so fully within the grace and plan of God that we enjoy God's pleasure and the benefits of His Kingdom. As the writer James says "Blessed is anyone who endures temptation. Such a one has stood the test and will receive the crown of life that the Lord has promised to those who love him."

But I don't think Paul is just talking about what happens after we die. He's not just talking about pie in the sky. He's talking about the life we live right here and now. Judy and I once heard an African-American preacher preach on the topic "It's not pie in the sky when you die, it's how sound you are on the ground while you're still around."

Too many people climb the ladder of success only to reach the top and discover it's leaning against the wrong wall.

So let's be clear about our goal and then as Paul says, "don't run like a man running aimlessly," Stay in the lane. Look to the finish tape. Focus. Run straight.

A few years ago, I learned to fly a plane. Out at Lilydale airport. After a few lessons, I discovered that flying a plane was really easy. It was landing that was difficult. Anyway, they taught me how to take off. The method was to get the plane at the Yarra Glen end of the runway pointing towards Mount Dandenong. You lined the pointy end of the plane right at the TV towers on Mount Dandenong, pulled the engine up to maximum power and let the brakes go. As the plane bounced down the grass strip, you only had one task. Keep the nose pointed at those TV towers. The plane did the rest. It picked up speed. The wings produced lift. It took off. I just had to focus. Stay in line. Run straight for the goal.

Nobody exemplifies this better in their own life than the apostle Paul. For years he was climbing the ladder of success. If he'd been living today he would have been in New Idea every Wednesday. And Famous every Monday. Paul, or Saul as he was known then, was the famous Christian killer of Asia Minor. But his ladder was leaning on the wrong wall. All the energy he was putting in was focussed on short-term, worldly goals. His work had no eternal value. But then he encountered Jesus on the road to Damascus, and his goals were transformed. And so was his life.

Paul says, be serious about the training. He says, run for the eternal prize.

And thirdly, he says, develop self-control. Develop mastery over self. He says he "beats" his body and makes it his "slave." He says this after saying that we ought not to "box as though beating the air."

There's a play on words here that is a bit lost in translation. Paul is describing the boxer who goes into the ring and can't land a punch. Actually, I had this experience once. The only time in school that I put on boxing gloves and had a go at boxing. I had never tried boxing before, although I had landed the occasional punch in the school yard. Unfortunately, the guy I was sparring with HAD tried boxing before. And every time I threw a punch he ducked and weaved out of the way. And, of course, every time I ducked and weaved, his punches seemed to duck and weave after me. Anyway, after two rounds of my beating the air, I asked the coach how I was doing and he said, "Keep going, the breeze might give him a cold."

So Paul says, don't box like this. Instead punch your body on the chin. It's an image meant to convey the idea of subduing one's body. Make your body, your slave. Get your body under control. Paul is talking about taking charge of self. Not just your muscles and limbs. He's talking about taking charge of your self. He's talking about self-control.

The American publishing house, Zondervan, have published a Bible called the Leadership Bible. It's the NIV translation with copious notes and references for those who aspire to leadership. Commenting on this passage, the Leadership Bible says "Paul trained for his daily spiritual journey like a world-class athlete. Why? Because he wanted to have the self-control to finish the race without being disqualified. We need to cultivate this same kind of spiritual fitness. ... If you want to be an effective person, identify the habits you need to build into your life so you can live with diligence—habits such as physical fitness, balance between work and home, financial and personal accountability, proactivity in the work place. Strap on your shoes and get going. Disciplined habits will give you the momentum you need not only to move forward, but also to run your earthly race with strength and purpose."

I think we could do worse than look to the life and example of St Paul. He was an amazing man who disciplined his life so magnificently that he became a champion of God.

God gave Paul the power to become this champion. And God can give us the same power. As Paul writes to his young disciple, Timothy, “God did not give us a spirit of cowardice, but rather a spirit of power and of love and of self-discipline.”

What is self-discipline, self-control? Well, I think it is the quality that allows a person to do what needs to be done when he or she doesn't feel like doing it.

Dr Henry Cloud is a psychiatrist. He tells the story of one patient, whom he calls Sarah. Sarah had been in therapy because of conflicts she had with her parents, husband and children. One day, she said to Dr Cloud, “I haven't told you about this relationship before, though I guess I should have. I have tremendous problems with this one woman. She eats too much, and she has an attacking tongue. She is unreliable—lets me down all the time. And she's spent money of mine and hasn't paid me back in years.”

Dr Cloud asked, “Why haven't you mentioned her before?”

Sarah replied, “Because she's me.”

Self-control begins in recognising our own limitations, and committing ourselves to begin work on them. I actually wrote “committing ourselves to overcome them,” but then I realised that some things within each of us aren't that easy to deal with. Some things require much prayer, help from others, and a lifetime of constant effort. But many things are easier to get control of.

Instead of saying “The Devil made me do it” we might need to be readier to admit when we are to blame ourselves. Anyone can learn better time management. Poor listeners can learn to talk less and listen more. Shy folk can discover ways to be more assertive.

This is self-control. Getting mastery over oneself, in order to be equipped to live fully within God's grace. The reason this is so important is that self-control is the only control a person can really have. No person can control another person. That is not control. That is influence. You can influence another's reactions or choices, but that other person has the choice of whether or not to respond to you and how to respond to you. Refusing to control yourself and trying to control others is a waste of time.

Now self-control is a big topic. More than enough for a month of Sunday sermons. Paul writes a lot about self-control. He says the fruit of the spirit is self-control. Paul may not have had a degree in psychology, but he understands the human condition well enough without it. And self-control is a key to living the kind of life that is good and Godly.

Daniel Goleman is the author of the best-selling book, Emotional Intelligence. He spends his time analysing why some leaders develop to their fullest potential and why most don't. Most leaders hit a plateau a long way from what they are capable of. His conclusion? The difference is (you guessed it) self-control. He calls it 'emotional self-control.' What characterises maximised leadership potential, according to Goleman? Tenaciously staying in leadership despite overwhelming opposition or discouragement. Staying in the leadership game and maintaining sober-mindedness during times of crisis. Keeping ego at bay. Staying focused on the mission instead of being distracted by someone else's agenda. All these indicate high levels of emotional self-control. Goleman says, 'Exceptional leaders distinguish themselves because of superior self-control.'

Well, Daniel Goleman is obviously smart. But I got that by reading St Paul.

In summary,

First. Be serious about training. Get fit for Christian service, and stay fit.

Second. Be clear about the prize. Discover God's unfolding plan for your life. And focus on it.

Third. Get control of yourself.

Here is a little devotional from the Christian author, Max Lucado:

Its quiet. Its early. My coffee is hot. The sky is still black. The world is still asleep. The day is coming.

In a few moments the day will arrive. It will roar down the track with the rising of the sun. The stillness of the dawn will be exchanged for the noise of the day. The calm of solitude will be replaced by the pounding pace of the human race. The refuge of the early morning will be invaded by decisions to be made and deadlines to be met.

For the next twelve hours I will be exposed to the days demands. It is now that I must make a choice. Because of Calvary, I'm free to choose. And so I choose. I choose Self-control...

I am a spiritual being. After this body is dead, my spirit will soar. I refuse to let what will rot, rule the eternal. I choose self-control. I will be drunk only by joy. I will be impassioned only by my faith. I will be influenced only by God. I will be taught only by Christ. I choose self-control. Love, Joy, Peace, Patience, Kindness, Goodness, Faithfulness, Gentleness, and Self-control.

A-men