

Proper 15 Year C 2022 (NRCL)

'Let us run with perseverance the race which is set before us'.

No, I'm not talking about competitors in the Commonwealth Games, I am talking about the instructions given by the writer of the Letter to the Hebrews, whoever that was - certainly not St Paul. So what must we do to run this race with success, this one-way, long-distance race, which will reach its destination in God's heavenly kingdom? The writer continues his athletic imagery to suggest three things in particular.

Firstly, we must get rid of any heavy weight which is slowing us down, anything which obstructs our effort, whether it is anxiety about trivial things, being easily distracted by things other than the race, or a desire to use the Gospel for self-advancement or self-satisfaction (a form of spiritual pride) or resentment of other people - you know the things which distract as well as I do. The writer seems to have in mind the danger an athlete might face if the race track is strewn with debris of one kind or another, things which could trip you up and damage your chances of completing the course.

Secondly, he tells us we need patience - 'run with perseverance'. We are in it for the long haul. This isn't the hundred metre dash,

although some people seem to start that way - great enthusiasm at the beginning, leading to early exhaustion. This is a race run mile after mile, year after year - and it is a race which will have its ups and downs, like any cross country course - but, we are told, we just have to persevere. That is why we are offered retreats, quiet days, pilgrimages, prayer groups - as well as weekly or daily services; opportunities to refuel and be refreshed - time set aside to be lazy with God.

And thirdly, we are to keep our eyes, or at least our imagination, fixed on the finishing line and on the one who is at the centre of this great cloud of witnesses - those whom we need to look to for encouragement - keep our eyes on the one who has run the race and now sits at the right hand of God. He has made it across the finishing line and encourages us to follow in his footsteps, motivating us to continue in hope, in faith and with patience. He is the source of our eternal salvation. He knows about needing patient endurance, for he himself endured the cross - so keep looking to Jesus as you run this race that God has laid out for us. And this is a one-way trip; we cannot take another route, if we want to succeed. And it is a one way trip which can at times be very uncomfortable. Jesus keeps confronting his disciples with

the bare truth, the uncomfortable reality, despite their unwillingness to hear it. When he sent out the seventy to proclaim the Good News, they came back full of enthusiasm and euphoria. Now he is telling them that things will be different. He has to go to Jerusalem. He has to die, and nothing they can say or do will change that. 'I have a baptism with which to be baptized, and what stress I am under until it is completed'. Living this reality today is difficult beyond words. Living a life which is unintelligible if God did not exist is so counter-cultural. Expectations of life are so high; we are constantly urged to seek more, and more - more exciting leisure activities, more indestructible health, because death is failure, and who wants to fail?; more advanced technology (the number of people who look at me amazed when I confess - as if I had done something wrong - that I don't have a smart phone, a Tablet (whatever that is), a lap-top and I don't engage in so called social media). I seem to manage perfectly well. Nothing wrong with those things if you need them, but they aren't the be-all and end-all of life. To develop any sort of detachment from the all-consuming preoccupation to be all-consuming requires a great deal of distancing from the social pressures around us, pressures which

tell us that we can and should have everything, because we are worth it.

Jesus' invitation to run the race which is set before us, to run the race which he has run is not an invitation to perpetual sunshine - he tells us there will be times of darkness - but we will know how to cope with times of darkness. What is on offer is not death but abundant life. That is what he promises, as he invites us to follow him on this one-way trip.

Today is the day the Church remembers Maximillian Kolbe, Franciscan friar and martyr. He gave his life in Auschwitz, to save the life of another man - you may some time ago have seen pictures of Pope Francis praying in his cell. He ran his race, he persevered and kept his eyes on the prize and now he is amongst that great crowd of witnesses which surrounds us. Few of us are asked to pay so great a price, but nevertheless we are asked to 'run with perseverance the race which is set before us'. This can all be summed up in the prayer which is presented to us in most hymn books -

Father, hear the prayer we offer;

Not for ease that prayer shall be,
But for strength that we may ever

Live our lives courageously.

Not for ever in green pastures

Do we ask our way to be;

But the steep and rugged pathway

May we tread rejoicingly.

Not for ever by still waters

Would we idly rest and stay;

But would smite the living fountains

From the rocks along our way.

Father

Be our strength in hours of weakness,

In our wanderings be our guide;

Through endeavour, failure, danger,

Father, be thou at our side. Amen.