

2 Kings 5:1-14 Mark 1:40-45

It's not a game!

The Winter Olympic Games, the Commonwealth games, the Olympics; these great sporting events take up a lot of news space. In the Roman and Greek ancient world, the games also had a terrific profile. Besides the Olympics there were many local games; Corinth had the Isthmian Games, every two years, held in honour of its Gods; they continued for nearly a thousand years until the 4th Century AD. In times of war a truce allowed safe passage of athletes to the Games.

Young men trained at the Gymnasium; but whereas in English gymnasium is a sports centre, in Europe a Gymnasium is a grammar school. The gymnasium trained them in sports, and academically philosophically and socially. Sportsmen - not women I'm afraid - became terrific celebrities.

We've been watching the athletes training hard on the news - now they are competing. Paul in his letter to Corinth draws on the well-known facts of the games as an illustration of the Christian life. As he says, they train and compete to receive a perishable crown - instead of a gold medal the winner was given a crown of green leaves - so we live the Christian life to receive an imperishable crown.

But what are the points of comparison between the games and the conduct of the Christian life; how we be the way true spiritual athletes; to put it pointedly, what we do need to be like, so as not to be drop outs in the Christian race, non-finishers, with all that implies.

You see just turning up is not enough. At work clocking in is not enough. I taught at an expensive school; in some cases students from privileged backgrounds seemed to think, just turning up was enough; if they arrived we should get them through the exams without any great effort on their part; they complained if they got low marks. I remember some seventh formers I graded low telling me, but you haven't taught us to write essays. I said, turn to page 7 in my notes; see, how to prepare an essay; now turn over - yes, how to construct an essay. They had the grace to admit I had taught them - they had just not followed through.

The Corinthian Church seems to have had this problem. For them, being a Christian meant just turning; holy baptised; taking the holy communion. That was holiness.

But in a later chapter Paul has them on about the selfishness that has crept into their worship. In those days communion happened in the context of a shared meal. *But each of you goes ahead with your own supper; some get drunk while others go hungry.* You are humiliating your poor brethren he says; and then you think of sharing in holy communion.

To be baptised and to share in holy communion, divorced from a real life of faith lived out for Christ, is a road to spiritual destruction.

Instead of just turning up, we need to stick with Christ, as a runner sticks with a pacemaker, as an athlete sticks close to their coach.

In the Christian race of course there is not just one winner; but everyone needs to cross the finishing line to win the prize of eternal life with Jesus Christ our Lord, the holy and eternal one. Paul says, in the games, the competitors run to win; well you, run in the right way to win Christ's prize of welcome.

Olympic competitors take on the discipline of preparation; fitness, technique, diet, routine, practice, mental preparation, study. They have a training regime, a disciplined programme, suited to their event.

So for Christians there is a way of life that goes with the race we are in. There are things to avoid – and things to do – things to aim at, things to refuse. It's obvious.

Paul changes the sporting comparison from running to boxing.

I box, not as if beating the air; I buffet my body, and subdue it.

It would be no good Joseph Parker spending all his time shadow boxing; he has to learn to take blows. The boxers muscles, are toughened so as to be capable of absorbing a punch that would knock you or me into the middle of next week. Our rugby players are the same; they get up after terrible knocks.

It sounds as if Paul is saying, you need to harden up spiritually. Harden up.

But can that be right? Aren't people like John Kirwan and Mike King saying, this is a big part of our problem – that people don't share their problems, can't be honest about their vulnerability.

Actually Paul is saying something more profound; he means yes, you need to harden up where you are soft; and soften up where you are hard.

Paul talks about the boxer subduing their body; the point of the comparison is with the Christian and the soul. At the core of Paul's meaning is the temptation of selfishness.

We are selfishly soft when we run away from telling the truth, when we live to eat, when we can't be bothered to get up and pray, or we gossip, corners at work, when living our life equals self indulgence, living in fantasy and day dreams, envy, impatience, irritability. We need to harden up and become less self indulgently weak.

But we need to soften up when it comes to some things; our hard judgments of others, our hard heartedness, our indifference to suffering, our hard self sufficiency and self importance. Yes, Kirwan is right, the macho man needs to soften up.

Soft where hard, hard where soft – and being **unselfish** covers both. Jesus gave everything to people – time, attention, prayer, intelligence, insight. He laboured to rescue a Mary Magdalene, to reach a leper, to heal a madman.

And God has given us good works to do also.

Why do we fail – because we are selfish – we are soft and so we don't want the hassle; or we are hard and don't care. Both reactions come from pride and selfishness. The priests passed by on the other side of the road to the battered Good Samaritan; but the Father ran

to protect the ragged figure of the prodigal son returning. Even noticing, even remembering takes effort. Our natural affection helps us love our close family members; beyond them, to our relatives and friends and neighbours, it takes Christian discipline to notice, remember, to act with the love of Jesus.

That discipline involves of course faith, prayer, the word of God, listening to God, worship together, study, holy communion. These are the means of grace. But discipline also it means definitely dealing to our selfish attitudes, our resentments, our laziness, indifference, or greed; our anger, sulkiness, prejudice, self importance or self pity.

And this is a big job; it involves a lifetime's discipline; but we have a wonderful coach, Jesus, who has run the race before us and who is with us every step of the way. When you have a great coach you want it do it for them; you know they are giving everything for you. So is Jesus to us.

Now it may be that some of us are thinking, well I may as well give up; I've tried; I've failed. I always get stuck in a bad place, try as I might. There's something wrong with me. There's no point trying any more, even though I want to follow Christ I', all weak and wobbly

And here we can turn to our gospel passage; to the sick leper who truly desired to be made well, made clean; this leper, full of sores, dead to his family, cast out from society; he came imploring Jesus for help.

We may be full of failure and discouragement, yes and sin;

falling on his knees – humbly taking the lowest place in his deplorable state

He said, if you will you can make me clean. He puts his entire hope in Jesus and the power he knows Christ has. He believed Jesus.

And He was made clean.

And Christ has the same power today to enable us to stand up and be Christians. He says, I am willing, be made clean.

Do we ask though.

Now it is also true that some habits, some difficulties are very deep rooted. But Christ has appointed helpers, people to pray with, to help us. Our pride holds us back from them. But they are there to help. Some of life's wounds need healing before we are free. Our head coach Jesus has assistant coaches. The story of the leper is our encouragement to keep on coming to Jesus whenever we fail.

So let's harden up where we are soft; and let's soften up where we are hard, by God's grace; amen

