

Living Well

Sunday 8 August 2021

### **Olympic Casualties**

The UK has done so well in the Olympic medal count but what has been even more surprising this year is the mental scrutiny of the performers. We expect Olympic athletes to be at the top of their game physically but this year, a number have stumbled because of their mental health. We might think of the American gymnast Simone Biles who bowed out because of her disorientation during her acrobatic twists and turns. British swimmer Adam Peaty has also suffered, forcing him to take a month off his training schedule. We might also think of Churchill's 'Black Dog' and other ailments which beset those in the news. The BMX silver medallist Kye Whyte struggled with Peckham's gang culture until he was saved by a youth worker. His colleague Beth Shriever burned with jealousy when her funding was withdrawn but not from the men.

No doubt the pandemic has made us more aware of mental health issues in society and not just the famous ones. Many others will have struggled with these issues, knowing that they were not at their best. Royal support for those suffering from mental health issues has been welcome and it may herald a change of attitude in society. So many of us suffer in this way. Support of friends and family is critical, as well as professional help.

### **Falling Short.**

Depression, jealousy, poverty, poor health and bad company are just some of the issues which can hold us back from being at our best and St. Paul knew that when he wrote our lesson today from a prison cell in Rome.

Paul lists a number of common problems suffered by those first Christians and will no doubt be found among us today. Lying, anger, theft, gossip, slander and lust are just a section of the problems which beset the Ephesian Christians as well as many of us.

So what is to be done? Paul's solution is to remind us that we are one body – his favourite metaphor for the Church. We don't all have an Olympic training team to support us but we are all members of The Church. As one body, we are intimately connected to one another and more especially to Christ, the cause and focus of our unity. That unity will modify our behaviour. As parents and grandparents, we will know how powerful the influence of friends can be. We can easily adopt the prevailing attitude of the group, be it good or bad. We learn from one another. Professor Grace Davie, a sociologist of religion, talks about 'believing, belonging and behaving'. There is a clear link between these three steps. We grow in our belief and so belong to a church which then modifies or sometimes revolutionizes our behaviour. An athlete will be urged on by their training team, just as we are encouraged by our brothers and sisters in Christ in all sorts of ways.

## **Sacrifice.**

It is the possibility of a medal which urges on our athletes. Kye Whyte only forsook his gang mentality when he realized that the training discipline – which he hated – started to make him faster. He had to sacrifice himself to the training regime which eventually brought him a silver medal.

It is difficult to imagine the intimacy of an Olympic athletes support team. The closest I have ever got to such intimacy is rowing as a racing four – apart that is from the intimacy of the family which, for most of us works supremely well. Such intimacy demands honesty. The two go together and this is one of the remedies for poor performance which Paul suggests: “..let everyone speak truth to his neighbour, for we are members one of another.” (Ephesians 4.25). He alludes to putting on a new set of clothes which would make us feel different, as we might change from our gardening gear to go to the theatre. It gives us a greater confidence.

But do our present church structures hinder such intimacy and honesty between us? Certainly, Covid restrictions have not helped but is there something which we have recently learned from Covid that could strengthen our fellowship in the future? Of course, most of us will value those circles of trust where unvarnished honesty can be shared but is there any way that The Church could help here? Meeting for worship once a month just doesn't cut the mustard. Some churches organize house groups. But what about coffee groups now that The Evergreens has folded in Barrowden? Or prayer trees? Community rambles worked well too. During the lockdown a number of us have discovered the joy of praying together regularly using Zoom. It has transformed those relationships. We may have a low opinion of Zoom – it is not the answer to everything – but it might just help us feel a little more supported when we experience those bleak periods.

Just as grains of incense will melt when sprinkled on hot coals so we will be changed as we trust ourselves to one another. And the result? Clouds of glory; *'a fragrant offering'* in the words of St. Paul. Amen.