

Sermon for the Tenth Sunday after Pentecost

Text: Hebrews 12:1-2
Running the race

Recently, there was a marathon held in Brisbane. The length of the race was 42.2kms and the first runner crossed the finish line in 2 hours and 31 minutes. Many of us have watched marathon races on TV held at either the Olympic or Commonwealth Games and listened to commentators tell us of the feats of the runners as they appear on the screen. They describe the pain they are feeling, what their bodies are going through at each stage of this endurance race. They talk about the conditions of the race – how hot the weather is, whether the wind is helping or hindering the runners, whether the road is flat or hilly. The marathon is always a spectacular event as the runners try to match their skill and endurance against the record of those runners who have gone before them as well as overcome the difficulties the hills and the other runners present. For many of the runners it's not a matter of coming in the first three places but simply of completing the course. After all running 42kms is no small achievement in itself.

Here's a little trivia about the marathon. In the year 490BC there was a Greek soldier by the name of Pheidippides. He had taken part in a battle against the Persians on a plain about 40kms from Athens. The name of the plain was Marathon. Pheidippides was wounded, battered, fatigued from fighting in the battle but he knew the people back in Athens were waiting to hear whether they would continue to be free or become a part of the Persian Empire so he ran the 40 kms and stumbled into Athens shouting 'We have won' – and then collapsed and died. Because of that run from the Battle of Marathon, long distance or endurance runs are called marathons.

In the letter to the Hebrews we are told of a marathon. We are told about the champions of the past, the people who have won this race and have achieved the champions' prize for their effort. "*We have this large crowd of witnesses around us,*" the writer says, "*who are examples for us that we may follow in their steps of faith.*" The eleventh chapter of Hebrews

points out how the Bible is full of people who lived by their faith and trust in God. One who features in this list at length is Abraham.

Even though God asked him to uproot his family and go to a far-distant foreign land, with every confidence Abraham trusted God.

Even though God made promises to Abraham that he would be the father of a great nation when he didn't have any children and he and his wife were way too old to be parents, he still trusted God that this would happen. And when he finally did have a son he was commanded to go and sacrifice him on Mt. Moriah. As ridiculous and insane as this was, he continued to have faith in God's wisdom.

Such witnesses of faith not only exist in the Bible. I'm sure we can all think of men and women in our own lives who have had a powerful Christian influence on our life journey and encouraged us to trust God and grow in our faith. They modelled to us what it meant to trust in Jesus and they spoke words that encouraged us to make the most of the gifts and opportunities we have and helped us when things were hard. They were living examples of Christian love, joy and hope. In fact they have been a real inspiration to our own faith and Christian life.

The writer to the Hebrews refers to Jesus as a marathon runner and the endurance and perseverance that was demonstrated as he ran toward the finishing line – the cross. Going toward the cross and all that it meant was tough going, not just physically but there was also the mental and emotional anguish that came with it as well – just like a marathon. He could have pulled out at any time, in fact, he was tempted to do that on several occasions including his 40 days in the wilderness when he was tempted by Satan and then much later in the Garden of Gethsemane or anywhere in between. Jesus without question trusted his heavenly Father and the plan that God had to save humanity.

It was sheer faith in God that carried him through the mockery, the beatings, the whipping, the crucifying, the rejection and the disbelief of even those closest to him. The reactions of people including his own closest friends to his love and message about God's Kingdom must have left Jesus disillusioned and wondering how God could continue to strive to redeem such stubborn people and yet he didn't give up. We read in Hebrews, *"He did not give up because of the cross! On the contrary, because of the joy that was waiting for him, he thought nothing of the disgrace of dying on the cross, and he is now seated at the right side of God's throne"* (Hebrews 12:2).

But the writer of Hebrews is not content to dwell on other marathon runners and brings it right down to us, saying, *"Let us run with*

determination the race that lies before us". It is now our turn to run the marathon race of a lifetime. It's not easy. It's requires endurance and perseverance. There are all kinds of obstacles and difficulties that hinder our progress. We are runners running a race of faith and there is one goal – to reach the finishing line. We don't have to be first – just finish and the prize is ours.

Each of us has been given a race to run as we climb each hill and round each bend along the course toward the finishing line. Each person's race has its own difficulties and problems like any marathon, only in our race these difficulties come in the form of sicknesses and setbacks, worries and upsets. For some, it seems that the race is harder than it is for others.

Hebrews reminds us to *"rid ourselves of everything that gets in the way"* of successfully running the race.

You wouldn't run a race in a dinner suit or a ball gown.

You wouldn't carry a shopping bag of treats to eat along the way.

Neither would you start with the idea that every 2 minutes you would stop and have a 10 minute break because you want to look your best when you get to the finish line. To run successfully there are some things that you have to give up to focus on winning the race.

Running the race of life in Christ is losing some of the weighty things we carry around.

It's losing the weight of self-indulgence and the selfish material centred way of life.

It's losing all that pride, self-importance, the focus on our own achievements and our own goodness.

There is the weight of guilt over something we have said and done that has affected relationships with others.

There is the weight of ruthlessness that leads us to trample on others to get ahead or to make our point.

There is the weight of worry and anxiety about what tomorrow will bring. The weights of jealousy, hatred, lies, unkind words that burden us right down, making our race toward the finishing line so much more difficult. Like an athlete we would collapse along the way.

Just as a marathon runner must shed all extra weight in his/her body as well as wear the lightest possible clothing and footwear, likewise those running the race of the life of Christ need to shed everything that will prevent them from reaching their goal.

Giving up all that is sinful and getting our lives on the right track is hard stuff; it's a tough call to give it all up and give ourselves over to the race

ahead sticking to the straight and narrow way that leads to eternal life. In fact, no matter how many times we determine to turn our lives around and decide to get back into the race, we find that we're really not very good runners at all. It's easy to think, "I'm not one for running marathons, my persistence is very low, my ability to stick with Jesus, to follow him, to do what is pleasing to him is pretty lousy. I spend more time on the ground in sin, than I do on my feet running toward the finishing line".

The writer to the Hebrews reminds us that this race is a tough one and will challenge us all the way, but he says the race is winnable – Jesus has made sure of that. He has run the race ahead of us and made it possible for every runner to win the prize. He has knocked down every obstacle and smoothed every bump and lowered every hill. Trusting Jesus, all things are possible and nothing can prevent us from winning the prize. *"Let us keep our eyes fixed on Jesus, on whom our faith depends from beginning to end"*.

When things are tough, when everything goes against you, when you might feel like quitting and hanging up your running shoes, keep your eyes on Jesus, he will see you through.

When you believe that you aren't going to make it; you are too stressed, too worried, too depressed, too sad, too sick, keep your eyes on Jesus, he will see you through.

When you begin to believe that it's too hard, you doubt or you fall, Jesus picks you up, dusts you off, lovingly pats you on the back and points you to the finishing line.

His love will not give up. His forgiveness is never ending. His joy is to see us all arrive at the finishing line and receive the prize of eternal life. There is a medal there for you too.