

## Encouraging Exercise for Everyone

Sunday 14<sup>th</sup> August

Jeremiah 23:23-29  
Hebrews 11:29-12:2  
Luke 12:49-56

So, who enjoyed the Commonwealth Games?

Anyone go to any events?

Anyone go into Brum to soak up the atmosphere? (Or Solihull, apparently now part of Brum)

I'm told that amongst the competitors are known as "The Friendly Games"

Olympics etc "must win". Me against the world!

Poss because of the Home Nations – normally in same team

These seemed to be much more about doing their best, rather than beating others

And it seems to me that the Commonwealth Games actually have quite a lot to show us about some of the ideas in today's readings.

Tucked away right at the end of the passage from Hebrews we find this...

"Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us....." Hebrews 12:1.

Running. Races. Competition. Let's see how the Commonwealth Games can help us to understand what this might mean for us, individually and as God's people here in Shirley.

### First - Everyone

Therefore, ..... let **us** run with perseverance the race that is set before us.....

So, of course, the Games was an opportunity for some well-known sportspeople to compete on an international stage.

Yet among the well-known names there were plenty of what we would probably call "ordinary people" running their races (or participating in their sports)

Cycling – no qualification time, so Chris Symonds (a 48 year old doorkeeper at Houses of Parliament) who trains by cycling to work). Representing Ghana. Jim Horton from the Falkland Islands (46years old)

George Miller – 75 oldest gold medallist. Director for visually impaired bowler, Melanie Innes.

Replacing Rosemary Lenton – bowls. Took it up after being seriously unwell. Also does wheelchair curling (curling from a wheelchair...)

But it's not just the competitors who are needed for the Games

Coaches. Physios and nutritionists

The judges, umpires and timers

People who prepared the tracks and pitches

The people who dreamed up the opening and closing ceremonies

The people who were in them

The people who built the Bull!

The welcomers who made sure we knew which way to go, were smiling and - welcoming

Some 'professionals'

Mostly volunteers

All had the badges and the passes – and the commitment to makes the Games the best they possibly could be.

In the passage from Hebrews some of the people are named. Many are unnamed. Yet all find their place here. Preceding passage – names we recognise. Here less so.

Same in Paul's letters

But all noted – all part of the story.

It's not just about the big names.

In the same way as "Being church" here in Shirley Parish is not just about the people who stand up at the front – either literally or metaphorically (eg wardens, organisers of activities).

Everyone who is baptised has the badges and the passes and the opportunity to make the churches in Shirley Parish the best they possibly can be (and if you aren't yet baptised but consider yourself part of this church family then please speak to Rev Paul, or let Sarah or me know so we can put him in touch with you.)

We all belong. And just as everyone at the Games had a responsibility to contribute to making them a success, we also all have a responsibility to do what we can to make our churches communities of people who bring glory to God.

*[It takes a village to raise a child]*

[Reminder about stewardship forms]

But of course, none of the athletes or support teams or volunteers just turned up on the day without any preparation or training, so let's think about that now....

**So second -**

### **Training or preparation or exercise**

No-one who took part in the Commonwealth Games did so without any training or preparation.

Our Hebrews passage spoke about people of faith; people who were committed to living out their belief and trust in God through thick and thin. And in some cases giving their lives as a result.

And there is a sense in which some of the competitors and their support teams similarly have given – or at least dedicated – a huge proportion of their lives to their sport. Speak to the volunteers at the Games and you will find that they too have pretty much lived and breathed the Games over the past weeks and months – from training and preparation sessions to turning up whenever they were needed. The spectacular opening and closing ceremonies did not happen by chance. There were many, many hours of rehearsing, training and preparation involved.

So how do we train, or prepare?

At the Moving On group this week the video spoke of 5 things which can help us to grow as part of God's community here

- Prayer
- Bible
- Meeting together ie church with/without small groups
- Not comparing ourselves with others
- Being committed – but being gentle with ourselves.

And yes, we are all different – and some will prefer one way of doing these things and others will prefer another. The important things are finding the things that help us, and then doing them – whilst recognising that it's hard, and we won't always manage it! But being committed, and having another go. And another. And another....

The list includes meeting as part of a small group. And I know that small groups aren't to everyone's taste, but they have one great advantage of doing stuff on our own and that is...

Our third word

### **Encouragement**

“Therefore, **since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses**, let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us.....”

I am not aware that a single Commonwealth Games event took place in complete silence. Even in events where traditionally the move is made or the shot is played in silence, in between times the spectators make their presence felt. And if you were at the athletics, or the swimming then I'm sure that sometimes roar of the crowd was almost deafening. It certainly was at Edgbaston! Athlete after athlete, team after team spoke of the "lift" it gave them to hear the crowd's encouragement.

And whilst the loudest cheers were reserved for the local competitors, the crowd for the 5,000m cheered Rosefelo Siosi from the Solomon Islands for the 4 minutes it took him to finish after everyone else did. Similarly for the cyclists. Fabulous!

Encouragement. How important it is. And what a difference it makes. Don't we all feel that little bit better, that big bit affirmed, when we hear words of encouragement?

"Great cake!"

"That colour really suits you"

"Your prayers were really helpful today, thank you"

We are blessed to have so many encouragers as part of our churches. Please don't stop!

It's easy to be encouraged to do something we want to do. But we do have to be a bit careful. Because it can be very easy to be encouraged to do the wrong thing. Jeremiah urges us to be discerning in who we listen to – and in what we say to others.

On the other hand, it can be uncomfortable when we're being encouraged to do something we're **not** keen on. But again, we need to be discerning. Perhaps this unpalatable thing is exactly what we need, even though it will be uncomfortable. Perhaps the person encouraging us really does have our best interests at heart.

But maybe the times when we most need encouragement is when times are hard. Jesus is warning his followers that difficult times are coming. It reads really harshly, but I wonder if the followers who did indeed have to face up to those difficult times actually looked back to Jesus' warnings and found encouragement in what he had said. Jesus knew and was with them in all they were facing.

And Jesus is still with us in all we are facing. The Holy Spirit of Jesus is with us in all we do, cheering us on at every opportunity. Yes, sometimes gently pointing out when we're getting things wrong, but always pointing us in the right direction, never, never writing us off, or telling us we're a failure or useless. Those voices come from somewhere else entirely.

So let's be encouragers. And let's be encouraged!

For most encouraging of all is to see how God is working amongst us. The stories we hear week by week in our Wow! Moments, of how God is touching people in their daily lives. The lovely comments of how welcoming everyone is, how people feel at home.

The generosity and love that is so openly displayed.  
The sense of God's presence amongst us as we worship.

Be encouraged. Not only do we have a great crowd of witnesses cheering us on – God is with us.

The legacy of the Commonwealth Games will long remain in our memories. And it shows us so much about not just sport, but about ourselves as individuals and as the people of God in Shirley.

It's about everyone

We need to prepare, to train, to exercise

And we need to both be encouragers, and to be encouraged.

And in all this we have not just a crowd of witnesses cheering us on, but God himself living and working among us.

Best. Games. Ever?