

**August 18, 2019 Crossing the Finish Line Homily:** One of the principal characters in the Academy-award winning motion picture, “Chariots of Fire” is a young Scottish evangelical Christian and gifted athlete, Eric Liddell. Liddell distinguished himself as a world class sprinter while studying at Cambridge University in England and, in 1924, represented his country in the Summer Olympic Games in Paris. He was a man of unusual integrity. He ran for his faith and for the glory of God. During the Olympic Games he was a controversial figure, adamantly refusing to participate in any running events on the Sabbath day. In 1920, four years prior to the Olympics, Liddell spoke to a group of young athletes after a track event. He compared faith to running a race. “It’s hard”, he said. “It requires concentration of will, energy of soul.” He assured the youth that one experiences elation once the winner breaks the tape and crosses the finish line. “And where does the power come from to see the race to its end? From within”, he exclaims. The Kingdom of God is within the competing young athlete.

At the forefront of today’s second reading (Heb. 12:4) is the image of a race. Revisiting the text might be helpful here. “Since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us rid ourselves of every burden and sin that clings to us and persevere in running the race that lies before us while keeping our eyes fixed on Jesus.” (Heb. 12:1)

The author of the Letter to the Hebrews depicts the righteous of the Old Testament, the Patriarchs, prophets, martyrs and teachers, as a cloud of witnesses, standing by a racetrack and cheering on those who are running in the race as they did in their day. As true “athletes of faith” they are able to give sound advice because they have completed the race themselves. But what is required of the runner if not self-discipline, determination and perseverance? We are reminded of our destiny once we have completed the race. The one who perseveres in this world awaits a promised reward in the next.

In his Second letter to Timothy, St. Paul seems to share the view of the author of the aforementioned letter. He writes, “I have completed the race; I have kept the faith. From now on the crown of righteousness awaits me, which the Lord, the just judge, will award to me on that day”. (2 Tim.4:7)

Of the many legends in Irish folklore, there is one that is especially appealing and illuminating about what follows for the disciple of Jesus at the end of his earthly pilgrimage. At the hour of death he catches sight of a tavern where all the faithful shall together raise the cup in celebration. Anyone who has ever participated in competitive sporting events is fully aware that once the hard fought contest comes to an end and the team on which the player is a member is victorious, the celebration then ensues. In another popular sport, golf, it is sometimes called the “nineteenth hole”.

We must always keep our mind on the prize. Our eyes must be “fixed on Jesus, the leader and perfecter of faith”. “For the sake of the joy that lay before him he endured the cross, despising its shame and has taken his seat at the right of the throne of God.” (Heb.12:12:2) The many distractions life affords us today, in particular the on-going scandals in the church and the general decadence of Western culture, can weaken our resolve to follow Christ with courage and determination.

Having completed the race after a period of rigorous training in prayer and a life of personal sacrifice, Jesus is, and will always remain, the perfect model of faith and endurance. The one-time athlete, who followed the great cloud of witnesses in the Old Testament, is now our coach, and leading us to victory.

Amen!