

## **Message for February 27, 2022**

### **1 Corinthians 9:24-27**

Like many other people all over the world, last Sunday I watched the closing ceremony for the Winter Olympic Games in Beijing. It was all very impressive, but as I watched our Canadian athletes parade into the stadium led by Isabelle Weidmann proudly carrying our nation's flag, I couldn't help but remember the flag flap of sixteen years ago.

It was just before the Winter Games held in Turin Italy and there was a lot of debate and bad feeling over who would have the honour of carrying our nation's flag in the opening ceremonies. Contrary to what most of us might expect though, the problem wasn't that too many athletes wanted to do it, rather it was the exact opposite; none of them really wanted to. Being the flag bearer would have been the honour of a lifetime to most of us and the fact that no one wanted to do it was taken by many people as an insult. There was a furious backlash, and it was left to the well-known and respected Olympic gold medallist, Catriona Le May Doan to explain why.

In a low-key way she pointed out that most of the athletes do consider it an honour to carry the flag and that a lack of patriotism was not the issue. The problem was that the athletes are only at the games for a short period of time before their event. What this meant is that those present at the opening ceremonies would be competing very soon and possibly even on the next day. Le May Doan also noted that the athletes train for years and strive to reach the pinnacle of preparation, both physically and mentally, right before their event. While it may not be nice to say so, standing out in the cold for hours carrying a flag does not help an athlete prepare. Given a choice between carrying the flag or possibly winning a medal, it is obvious which the athletes would opt for.

The matter was finally resolved but one thing that this unhappy episode did was remind us of how seriously the athletes take the games. The focus of the games is to win, and the athletes don't want anything to distract them. But there is of course nothing new in this; indeed this is the way it was with the original Olympic Games.

In some ways the ancient games were very similar to our own but in other ways they were very different. Compared to our own games for example, most

of the events had few rules and they were also very brutal. There was certainly no sense of sportsmanship, and in fact many athletes even lost their lives either at the hands of the other competitors or by pushing their bodies too hard. But why were the ancient competitors so determined to win at all costs?

The answer is immortality. Back then statues were erected to honour the winners and what this meant was that while the athletes themselves would eventually die, their statues would still be standing. Winning meant immortality and it was thought that all the years of work and even risking one's life was well worth it! Of course they were wrong since, after all of these years, the statues are long gone. Competing and winning did not bring those athletes immortality but, not surprisingly perhaps, St. Paul thought of the games when he wanted to teach some of those ancient Greeks about immortality and the life everlasting.

With the Olympic Games in mind, St. Paul told the Corinthians that they were in a contest called the race of faith. And just like the Olympic athletes, they too had to work hard and discipline themselves if they wanted to win. It's not always easy, said Paul, to be a Christian. It is not always easy to do the right thing, to have faith in God and to trust him, especially in the face of life's apparent unfairness, heartaches, and tragedies. And because it isn't always easy to run the race of faith, it is sometimes tempting to slack off or even quit. But don't quit, Paul urged, and don't slack off either. Instead try and hang in there and do your best. Yes, said Paul, the race can be very hard, but think of the prize that you are going to get when you cross the finish line! The Olympic athletes competed for a statue or a perishable wreath but they on the other hand would receive the crown that will last forever, the crown of the life everlasting! And without being egotistical about it, Paul even urged the Corinthians to try and be like him. There were times when he got sick, tired, and discouraged. There were times when he felt like giving up and quitting, but would he? Absolutely, positively not! He was going to finish no matter what!

Now what Paul said to those Corinthians so long ago still has meaning for us. Just like the athletes in Beijing during the past few weeks, each one of us is also competing. We may not be skaters, skiers, or members of the hockey teams but make no mistake about it, we too are athletes, not physically but spiritually, and our goal is to win the great race of faith. But if we think of our lives as being like a great race, how is it going?

Well, some people haven't even got to the starting line yet and perhaps don't even realize that there is a race. Others know that the race is on but seemingly never get out of the starting blocks. They can tell you what denomination and even which congregation they belong to and yet, beyond that? They rarely if ever pray, worship, or give God a passing thought. Others are full of good intentions; all of the great things they are going to do for God, the church, and others, one day, some day! But sadly, one day, some day never seems to come.

We though know that the race is on and that we are competing but how are we doing? Are we going all out, pumped up and full of vim and vigor? Are we perhaps just trotting along, taking it at a slower but steady pace? Or are we barely hanging in, just putting one weary foot in front of the other, hoping that we won't stumble, fall, and land flat on our face?

It is not always easy to run the race of faith, and it takes energy, effort, discipline and even courage to do so. Sometimes it can be so tempting to ease off or perhaps even quit altogether. Jesus himself certainly knew that the race of faith is anything but easy and that is why he promised that he will always be there alongside of us.

The name Brian McKeever is probably not as well known to us as it should be but he is one of our nation's greatest athletes. McKeever is forty-two years old and suffers from Stargardt's Disease, a form of macular degeneration which has left him legally blind. This however has not held him back. He is a Nordic Cross-Country skier and Canada's most decorated winter Paralympian. He has won numerous medals at international competitions including gold at sprint cross-country events at the 2014 and 2018 Paralympic Games. He carried our nation's flag at the opening ceremony of the 2018 Paralympic Games, and even though this year he will be competing in his sixth Paralympics, he is still one of our great medal hopefuls.

Truly McKeever is a great athlete and inspiration for many, but as he is legally blind he has to rely on his guide to help him compete. The guide skis in front of him showing him the way, and the guide's job is a very challenging one too since McKeever himself is so fit and fast. McKeever truly is a great athlete but, and this is not to take anything away from his accomplishments, he is in part a winner because of the help of his guides.

The race of faith has been set out before us and sometimes the race is easy while at other times it is hard. At those times when the going gets tough, it is so easy to become discouraged and to want to give up and pack it in. And yet, we should never forget that we do not run alone; we have a guide, a helper. God is always with us, urging us on and helping us. Sometimes he does so through the spectacular, but more often than not he does so through the ordinary. No one wants to see us finish and no one wants to see us win more than what God does. Indeed, God isn't just the one running alongside of us, he is also the one waiting for us at the finish line, eager to award us the prize. In the words of an old Scottish Gaelic prayer:

“On my heart and on my house, the blessing of God.  
In my coming and in my going, the peace of God.  
At my end and new beginning, the arms of God  
to welcome me and bring me home.”

### **Pastoral Prayer**

Gracious God, hear us as we once again bow our heads in prayer before you.

On this, the last Sunday of yet another month, we thank you for the gift of this month now coming to a close, with all of its wintry beauty. We thank you for the lengthening days and the increasing warmth of the sun. We thank you too for all that enables us to not only survive but thrive in our northern climate, including the food that nourishes us and our warm homes and clothes that sustain us.

We thank you for the ministry of your Son, and that you have called us to be a part of his body here on earth, continuing both as individuals and as a church to carry on his ministry. Through your Spirit, help us to do our best.

We thank you for this nation in which we live. Despite all of the tension of the past few weeks we are still, relatively speaking, blessed with peace and

stability. We remember and pray for all those places in this world that are not as blessed as we are. We especially pray for the people of Ukraine, fearing for their lives and what the future may have in store for them after the past week's unprovoked and unnecessary invasion. We pray for the leadership of not only our nation but all the others too as they determine how best to respond to this act of aggression.

As the pandemic restrictions continue to be relaxed, we pray for the safety and well-being of all. We pray for all who are ill and all who mourn. We pray too for the well-being of all awaiting medical tests and procedures that have long been postponed. We pray for all those who work within our medical system as they continue to cope with all of the stresses and pressures.

We thank you for your church here on earth, that despite her shortcomings and failures, she is still an outpost and a forerunner of your kingdom here on earth. We pray for the sake of her ministry, that she may be a suitable tool in the workshop of your world. To this end, we pray as well for the sake of this church family of which we are a part.

We ask these things in your Son's name. Amen