

Sermon

Introduction

I wonder, has Olympic Fever hit in your household? Have you been avidly following your favourite sport, or been swept up in the ins and outs of a totally new one? Have you been inspired by the strength, skill and fitness of the athletes and, at this point at least, intend to get your old kit out, or turn over a new leaf. Or maybe you're like me and fascinated by the coaches and the 'journey' that every athlete has been on, from young enthusiast to Olympian, or even Olympic Champion. There are some great stories at this Olympics: Simone Biles, Andy Murray, Adam Peaty, Auntie Ni (aged 61). Each one is a tale of becoming, of fulfilling a destiny, and of hard work and dedication, sacrifice and faithful support from coaches and backroom teams.

Looking at the passage

In today's passage from the letter to the church in Ephesus we're encouraged to see our life as Christ's church in a similar way. The first three chapters of the letter have been full of big theological concepts and foundational ideas about God and his people, but this is the point at which the practical skills section of the coaching programme begins. We have rehearsed the facts of salvation history but now we begin to work out how we can live in the light of them despite our weaknesses and vulnerabilities from earlier and current injuries. The activists among us may be tempted to think 'at last', but the first thing for us all to note is that it is all those fundamentals, knowing them in our minds, hearts and our guts, that has established our 'usness'! The practical advice that the letter contains is to maintain the unity of the church, built on Jesus' life, death and resurrection, rather than to create it. All the humility and gentleness, patience, the 'bearing with one another in love' the letter speaks of comes from Jesus' humility in leaving his heavenly home and camping out in this world to bring patient, healing love into its brokenness. All too often we read passages like this in order to find ways to solve the challenges we find in church life and come away chastised "if only I could love that So-and-So more we'd have unity", when in fact we are one – think the communion service 'Though we are many we are one body, because we share one bread'. The passage shows us that we are caught in a loop, but in a good way, we are one because Jesus makes us one. So we need to practice the unity that he has given to us, we need to train in it and perfect it. Martin Luther put it like this: 'This life, therefore, is not godliness but the process of becoming godly, not health but getting well, not being but becoming, not rest but exercise. We are not now what we shall be, but we are on the way. The process is not yet finished, but it is actively going on. This is not the goal but it is the right road.'

At present, everything does not gleam and sparkle, but everything is being cleansed.¹

*"A Defense and Explanation of All the Articles." Luther's Works 32, p. 24.
Edited by George Forell. Augsburg, 1958.
(Downloaded from Working Preacher website 31-07-2024)*

Pause: I wonder if any of that touches you this morning? Maybe that's something to come back to later in the service or in a quiet moment later in the week.

I first read this and liked it on the basis that the 'life' being described was mine, or yours, or yours. I don't speak or read medieval German so I can't check it out, but I'm now wondering whether in fact the life that is being described is our shared life, church life, lived in unity, but aware that we are 'on the way' to realising it completely. In that case, the mercy and sense of relief that we feel when we read these words for ourselves, can also be there when we face up to the imperfections and irritations of church life. These are the encouragements that were lovingly sent to the church in Ephesus and to us:

"The gifts he gave were that some would be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers,¹² to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ,¹³ until all of us come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ."

The gifts given to individuals are for the benefit and growth of all, which means dear friends, that we are not alone in 'this life', we are supported and coached and encouraged by one another when "each part is working properly, [it] promotes the body's growth in building itself up in love.

I think these words come at just the right time for us, a parish in vacancy. They remind us that each and every one of us is united to the rest by Jesus, through Jesus and in Jesus: his love, his work on the cross and the hope we enjoy through his resurrection. We are not chasing a dream of unity, we are learning to live that reality and we do that by building one another up, by using the gifts that we have for the good of others, by bearing with one another because we understand that we are all 'on the way', Jesus' way, the way of the cross. Each of us is gifted and needed if this body is to thrive.

Pupdate!

I'm going to conclude with a Guide Dog pupdate. (Not about Rowan this time, but about Umber, one of our other Tutshill pups.) Umber's Puppy Raisers

noticed that he was limping. They had a look at his paw, but couldn't see anything wrong, and the prodding about didn't make him wince, so they concluded that he was being a bit precious (these are very bright, sometimes diva-ish pups). But over a couple of days the limp got worse, with no apparent injury. Hoping to avoid a trip to the vet, Umber's PR took a look at his other paws and found a small, but deep cut on a different paw. With a bit of DIY treatment and a few days away from pavement walking Umber is fine, and gambolling about and training hard to be a life changer.

Umber's PRs couldn't see what was causing him pain, and the limp wasn't in fact in the foot that was hurt, but in looking after all his feet they found the injury and were able to help him. And that makes me think about the church. Sometimes it's hard for us to tell which part of the body isn't working properly, which part is in pain, we just recognise that we as a community are limping in some way. (Maybe some relationships are strained, or money is a worry, or our pool of available volunteers is running dry.) It's then that we need to hold onto this idea that it is in the unity of the body, building one another up, feeding and encouraging and sometimes challenging behaviours, that we all find healing and the church flourishes.

But speaking the truth in love, we must grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, ¹⁶from whom the whole body, joined and knitted together by every ligament with which it is equipped, as each part is working properly, promotes the body's growth in building itself up in love.

Amen.