

In last month's (August) newsletter, I wrote about the big sporting events that were happening or had happened this summer. Unfortunately, I didn't notice until it was published that at the end of a list of events I had managed to lose an important phrase, 'and by the time you read this the Olympics will be underway in Paris.' Well the Olympics (and Paralympics) are over and Team GB did quite well winning a total of 65 medals, 14 gold, 22 silver and 29 bronze, putting them in 7<sup>th</sup> place for gold medals or 3<sup>rd</sup> in total number of medals won. But even though the 'great summer of sport' is at an end and we are already a few weeks into the football season all those sports fans among you still have plenty to look forward to.

In recent years though the Olympics have become as much a cultural as a sporting event, as witnessed especially in the opening and closing ceremonies. So what about a sporting fixture that is a cultural event in its own right? The first Saturday of September sees the annual celebration of the Braemar gathering. It is a day of traditional Highland sports and games – including tossing the caber, throwing the hammer and a hill race – as well as performances by Highland dancers and pipers. Its history may not be as ancient as the Olympics (the modern form of which dates from 1896 but whose inspiration comes from the ancient Greek games) but the Gathering dates from the early 18<sup>th</sup> century in its current form and can be traced right back to gatherings at Braemar in the days of Malcolm III, King of Scotland in the 11<sup>th</sup> century.

St. Paul, writing in a time of cultural clashes between Jewish and Greco-Roman influences in the early Christian church, may have been thinking of the ancient Olympic games when he wrote to the Corinthians, 'Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one gets the prize? Run in such a way as to get the prize. Everyone who competes in the games goes into strict training. They do it to get a crown that will not last, but we do it to get a crown that will last forever.' (1 Corinthians 9:24-25). He also wrote to the Hebrews, 'let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us,' (Hebrews 12:1), and in his first letter to Timothy, 'Fight the good fight of the faith. Take hold of the eternal life to which you were called' (1 Timothy 6:12). And finally, he wrote of himself, 'I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith' (2 Timothy 4:7).

Whatever sport they are competing in athletes or players, if they are to be successful, need to train hard, whether it is to win an Olympic medal or the FA Cup, they have to have determination and complete dedication. It may have been a novel way of looking at faith for those early Jewish or Greek believers but they would all have seen the value in training and practice to 'perfect' their faith. The same goes for being a Christian today – it takes practice. The advantage that they, and we have over athletes who are training purely for the physical is that in our spiritual training we have the grace of God to help us. As the great hymn by John Samuel Monsall says, 'Fight the good fight with all your might / Christ is your strength and Christ your right / lay hold on life and it shall be / your joy and crown eternally.'

So, whatever your opinions about sport, this autumn let us all train and practice our faith and, 'Run the straight race through God's good grace.'

Janet.