

Homily: Rt Rev Thomas McMahon, Bishop of Brentwood

The Joshua Camp, Thursday 2 August 2012

Today I want to talk with you about 2 Olympic themes: the first is 'carrying the torch' and the second theme is that of 'running the race'.

I was present outside Brentwood Cathedral when the Olympic torch passed by some weeks ago. There were thousands of people who had turned out to be present in the streets.

It is amazing to think that the flame began its journey from Athens to Britain across a 10-12,000 mile journey.

It is estimated that 10 million people have turned out to see the torch in the streets of the United Kingdom.

In Ancient Greece, the concept of light was revered and was seen in contrast to darkness. And so light and the torch became a symbol of faith and hope in a darkened world. Yes, large crowds turned out across Britain for the torch itself, but I like to think that people also gathered to see and support those who were carrying the light.

The Christian life has always been a challenge between light and darkness, one of the great New Testament themes. Christ proclaims himself as the light of the world and says that "the one who does not follow me walks in darkness".

The important question for us to ask ourselves is: do we try each day to follow Christ our light? And the more important question: are we therefore light bearers to our world, to those around us, by our way of life, by the way that we witness to Christian values?

When the Pope was in this country in 2010 he addressed to the young some very important questions: what kind of society do you belong to? Whichever part of the world you come from, I want you to ask yourself that same question.

Pope Benedict XVI took the theme of Cardinal Newman 'heart speaks unto heart' saying to the young: I want you to look into your own heart and ask yourself "what kind of person do I want to be?"

There will always be in all of us because of our fallenness that tension between light and darkness. Since you are here in East London very much to do with being formed in the gospel and sharing this with others, how much are we all called to be light bearers to our world.

My second Olympic theme is 'running the race'.

It is interesting to recall that the Olympics began in Greece in the year 776BC. The torch was brought from Mount Olympus, the home of the gods, and competitors gathered not for medals made up of gold or silver or bronze but for laurel leaves, and not only athletes but poets and musicians were part of the whole Olympic event.

There were no national flags, no medals, no national anthems. What was it all about? It was about individual strength, skill, training, discipline and commitment. All of those are good words for the Christian life. When Christianity replaced the old religion in the Roman empire then the Games were abolished, only to be revived 120 years ago.

It is sad when the emphasis today is solely on achievement. People were asking yesterday: when will TeamGB win some gold medals? The earliest emphasis of the Games was on taking part rather than on achievement and success.

The Games feature strongly in the New Testament. Its writers were fascinated between the parallel of running the race and the Christian pilgrim making for the finishing line of life. To quote St Paul "forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead I press onward towards the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God".

And the same theme is taken up of course by Hebrews: "let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us".

What an analogy: life as a race, a marathon, with only one thing necessary for us Christians and that is not the winning so much as the keeping our eye on Jesus, remembering that our faith is not first and foremost built on teachings or doctrines or rules and regulations but around a person, the person of Jesus.

The very important question we need to ask ourselves is this: "Is the person of Jesus *real* in my life, or just notional?"

I remember when Cardinal Hume was speaking to young people, he would pose a similar question in these terms: "in your relationship with the Lord are you a Sunday acquaintance, or a weekday friend?" A weekday friend means that "the person of Jesus and the gospel is so real to me that it spills over into every area of my life. I am a weekday friend."

These gospel values are then lived out in our lives, manifest in how we live, how we treat others. They flow from our relationship with Jesus.

So, I leave you with those 2 thoughts – that we are called to be torch bearers of the light to others in our world. Secondly, that we are to run the race of life always with our eyes fixed on Jesus, knowing that our race isn't for winners but rather for finishers.

Amen