

June 2012

Dear neighbours,

Not everybody loves sport. Though there are many different sports, and many of us follow or are active in one or another, it doesn't suit all.

As the build-up to the Olympics proceeds, there may be those who think that it's the most exciting event of the year. On the other hand there may be some sports lovers who wonder if the expenditure and the future projected use of the Olympic village and stadia is worth it.

Again, some may regret that sport is tainted by drug taking and think that the essence of the Olympic spirit is fair play. Still others, of an intensively competitive nature, may think that the end justifies the means.

In the world of Bible times sport did not play as big a part as now. The Olympiads and other games flourished in Greece. Most exercising, however, was to prepare soldiers to be fit for battle.

I have always enjoyed the lines of the hymn with the words, "Let courage rise with danger and strength to strength oppose". The idea of two supreme exponents of their sport head to head. Now, on any given day, one might overcome the other. But if both were equally supreme, and both were at their best on the day, what a titanic clash that would be. Mental stamina would play a big part. And it would be thrilling to be a spectator. Whether it happens in tennis, in boxing, in soccer, rugby or rowing it is absorbing to watch. Mind you, the hymn wasn't talking about sport but about overcoming temptation, a rather different matter altogether, and making a parallel with military supremacy.

As the Bible is always relevant it teaches a number of lessons about exercise and sport as you would expect.

Paul writing to Timothy in 1 Timothy 4.8-9 says, "Bodily exercise profiteth little: but godliness is profitable unto all things, having promise of the life that now is, and of that which is to come. This is a faithful saying and worthy of all acceptance".

It was originally written in Greek, and that language will allow it to be also translated "a little" or "for a little time" making it a little less disparaging. The point is that, compared with godliness, the enjoyment of participating in sport is very temporary. So it is to be a spectator if your team isn't winning!

A sportsperson's peak is not for long, depending a little on the actual sport, but many of you will know what it is to have been good once, perhaps even a champion, in your chosen discipline, and now it can't be done. They were "glory days", but not now.

Godliness is always a worthy pursuit. We would never be "past it". More than that it holds out in store a continuation into eternity. It brings no regrets of better days past. It encourages us the more and excites us as we see the day of our death, and the return of Jesus Christ, approaching. It diverts the glory from ourselves and gives it to God our Creator.

Godliness is not used lightly here, as it might be when we say, "cleanliness is next to godliness". Rather, it speaks of earnestness. Jesus said earnestly, "I am the bread of life: he that cometh to me shall never hunger; and he that believeth on me shall never thirst...him that cometh to me I will in no wise cast out" (John 6. 35,37). Paul writes earnestly, "Know ye not that they which run in a race run all, but one receiveth the prize? So run, that ye may obtain. And every man that striveth for the mastery is temperate in all things. Now they do it to obtain a corruptible crown; but we an incorruptible" (1 Corinthians 9. 24-25).

Then, on the subject of strength opposing strength, there is the record in the Bible of the contest between David and Goliath. The two armies of Israel and the Philistines were engaged in a stand-off. David's eldest brother rebuked his youthfulness saying, "I know...the naughtiness of thine heart; for thou art come down that thou mightest see the battle" (verse 28). What battle? The Israelite army was frightened to death of Goliath, especially when they saw his massive frame. They dared not fight.

I am sure you know the story but you might enjoy re-reading it in 1 Samuel 17. David was a slightly built, not fully grown youth, but the strength which he had, with which to oppose Goliath, was that he came in the name of the living God. Not to match Goliath physically but with his catapult and stones. (The use of a catapult was an accepted military weapon.) His aim was unerring and Goliath fell. The strength of God opposes the strength of the mightiest person who stands in opposition to Him.

Again, sport is not the be-all and end-all. Neither should it amount to a "religion". The Bible teaches that days are bad indeed when people are "lovers of pleasures more than lovers of God" (2 Timothy 3.4).

God challenges us that however much we follow sport or any other hobby we are to love Him more. God regards it as a personal offence if we do not. Surely this should spur us on to a renewed endeavour to worship and serve Him. "In him we live, and move, and have our being" (Acts 17.28). "Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, and cometh down from the Father" (James 1.17).

We wish TeamGB well. In 4 years' time another Olympiad is scheduled. And meantime there will be European and World Cups in various sports and competitions. It is a constantly changing scene. But Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, and today, and for ever (Hebrews 13.8). Of those who trust in Jesus Christ the Bible says, "we receiving a kingdom which cannot be moved, let us have grace, whereby we may serve God acceptably with reverence and godly fear" (Hebrews 12. 28).

Yours sincerely,