



Sermon preached by The Reverend Philippa White on 7 August 2016

The lectionary is a week out of synch. It would have been so much better if we'd had the next chapter of Hebrews this Sunday – the one that tells us to run with perseverance the race set before us. That would be really helpful to all of us preachers trying to make a link between today's sermon and the Olympics. Most churches will at least be able to do that next week – but here, we'll be celebrating our patronal festival by transferring the BVM from the day after, so the Subdean won't be able to do that either!

But we have the race-running language in our collect; and the Hebrews reading we had this morning is building up to it – the writer, in next week's passage, will come to the triumphant conclusion that, just like Abraham and Sarah and all the other heroes of faith he lists, we are called to run our race. They ran their race – they lived the life of faith to which God had called them, they went into the unknown and into danger trusting in God's promises – and we are called to be like them. Because they ran their race and God was faithful to God's promises, we too can trust in God's promises and be confident as we run our race. Just as the Olympic athletes in Rio are trusting in their training, and their coaches, and their hours of practice – we trust in God and in our community. They do what they were made to do and so do we. We run our race.

But looking for ways to make the Olympics talk about our readings might make us miss the other things going on in the world. It's tempting to have a lovely cheerful upbeat sermon about the Olympics and perseverance – but there are other, less cheerful, things still going on in the world. As God's people, called to do God's work in the world, it's up to us not to be distracted by the excitement of the Olympics from the places where our attention, our prayers and our action are needed.

And it might also make us miss what our readings are actually saying. Yes, faith is about perseverance; but unlike an Olympic event, we don't know exactly where we're going. As the author of Hebrews puts it right before he tells us all about the heroes of faith, faith is the assurance of things hoped for – the conviction of things not seen. What a fantastic, resonant phrase that is. But like most fantastic phrases, it needs a fair bit of thinking about. Olympic athletes know what they're aiming for; they know what their goal is; they know it's very straightforward. They just need to be the strongest, or the fastest, or the best. Difficult, but straightforward.

We, however, are setting out into the unknown, trusting in God's promises.

So if we expect our life of faith to be just like an Olympic race: training with a clear and concrete goal, running on a straight track with a finish line clearly marked, we will be disappointed; because faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.

Faith is assurance – but it's assurance of hope. It's conviction – but it's conviction of things that we can never prove. Faith means following God's call, like Abraham and Sarah – even when, like them, there's no clear end point. Faith means trusting in God's promises, even when, like Abraham and Sarah, the promise takes decades to be fulfilled.

Why would we do such a thing – such a reckless thing, stepping out without firm proof, in hope and faith?

Because what we believe is that God's promises are trustworthy; and faith in God is worthwhile.

Not just for us, but for the whole world.

And by trusting in God's promises, being assured of our hope, we are enabled to become part of the Kingdom.

Do not be afraid, little flock, says Jesus – it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the Kingdom.

God wants to give us the Kingdom – to enable us to become part of the Kingdom. And that doesn't depend on anything we do – it just depends on us trusting that promise. If we trust God's promise to give us the Kingdom, the Kingdom is ours.

But if we trust God's promise to give us the Kingdom, we are called to become part of the Kingdom – it's not something we can receive and hoard to ourselves. Receiving God's gift of the kingdom calls us to build the Kingdom in the world.

Stepping out in faith, like Abraham and Sarah.

Not worrying about the material things we have, or what we want, or even what we need.

Not making decisions based on how they will benefit us. Not being distracted by saving up for a better car, or a bigger house, or a larger pension. But paying attention to the calling of God and the needs of the world.

We're called to be ready for action. We're called to keep our eyes open. We're called to listen to God, who is giving us the Kingdom and sending us out with it – trusting us to make the Kingdom present in the world. To bring in the Kingdom that is fairness and justice.

What does the Kingdom look like? It looks like giving to those who have nothing, like working for the rights of the forgotten, like cooking meals for the homeless, giving sleeping bags to refugees, protesting when support for ill and disabled people is taken away. It looks like standing up against racism and hatred. It looks like speaking God's truth when the media refuses to listen.

The Kingdom looks like refusing to be distracted from the things of God by the things of fallen human nature, by the evil that human society is capable of. Working for the Kingdom is an expression of faith and hope that God will make a difference – but that we too have a part to play in making a difference.

In other words, as we work to build the Kingdom, God works alongside us. As we run our race, God stays beside us. As we trust in God's promises and live a life that says they are true, God prepares a feast for us; and, through us, for all the world.

