Let's Run
Hebrews 12:1-2

This week my mother turned 70, and so Su and the girls and I paid a flying visit to London for her birthday party. Which was great, except for all the hanging around in airport waiting lounges and seemingly endless train and underground journeys. But all that hanging around and public transport does at least let you see what other people are reading. Which is fascinating.

And this time it was what the young men were reading that caught my eye. Because here was one young lad, sitting opposite me, reading a magazine that as it's front page article offered him the chance to have a great set of abs. And then there's a guy reading a whole book on how to get the perfect V shaped figure, which I had to Google because I didn't have a clue what that was.

Now whilst this emphasis on fitness has almost become an idol in our culture, there's still something good there. I mean it's better to stay fit than end up driving one of those buggies from one fast-food joint to another.

The problem is when we look for easy solutions and think we'll get fit for no pain. 'Maybe if I just buy this magazine, I'll end up with a body like his', the '6 pack in six seconds' line, or we believe that this wonder diet that still lets me eat chocolate really will shift the spare tyre that's somehow got stuck on my waist. But deep down we know that real fitness requires training, and exertion and effort, which is why we admire athletes.

And what is true for physical health is true for spiritual health. And the writer opens chapter 12 by drawing just that analogy. He describes the Christian life as being like a race, an athletic race. And he encourages them to lay aside anything that hinders them running that race, to run it with endurance, and to do so looking to Jesus. But before we get there, he reminds them of all the people he's been telling them about in chapter 11.

The crowd in the stand
Verse 1: 'therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses.' He's just walked us down this hallway, lined with the portraits of men and women who have gone before, who have lived out what it means to live by faith, even in times of trial, and he's calling his friends and you and me to run this race of life. And, as we do, these guys, these saints from of old, who have gone before, they surround you.

Now, when he calls them a cloud, he's not thinking 'people sat on lovely fluffy clouds playing harps.' The word 'cloud' was used to describe large crowds of people. So if you say, the whole world was there, or the crowd was massive, they would say, 'there was a great cloud of people.'

And the image he's giving us is as if all these ancestors in the faith, Abel, Noah, Enoch, Abraham, Sarah, Moses, Rahab, the judges and the prophets, are all in the stands of the amphitheater, filling the stadium of heaven, watching, as now it's your turn to run the race.

Now, last Saturday the girls and I sat and watched England play Argentina at rugby, in Argentina. And it was a bizarre experience. England put one of their best moves together and got the ball out fast, and were passing it down the line, and scored this wonderful try in the corner, and the Slack living room went wild, and the stadium, filled with thousands of people, was silent. Not so much as a squeak. Now, if England had been playing at home, at Twickenham, the noise would have been deafening. But in Argentina, things were very different, and the difference was that there were no supporters cheering them on. The crowd was almost entirely Argentinian.

And I thought then about what some of the athletes described at last year's London Olympics. How the British rowers, as they entered the final distance, encountered this wall of noise coming from the stands as the crowd cheered them home. How when Mo Farrar was running for gold in the 5 and 10,000 the volume in the Olympic stadium was said to be unbelievable, and the energy that gave him.

And the writer is saying, guys, however lonely it sometimes feels running this race of faith, you are surrounded by this immense crowd, cheering you home.

And yet, it's not so much them looking to us, as us looking to them. You see, they aren't just spectators. They are witnesses. And they've been where you and I are now, and they've run this race before us, and they've enjoyed the highs and the lows, they've experienced the joys and the sorrows, and their lives tell us, they are witnesses to the fact, that this life of faith is absolutely worth it.

So, this isn't a stadium full of opposition supporters, strangely silent. It's like a stadium filled with previous athletic champions, all of whom know what you are going through, all of whom you can look at and say: God proved faithful to them, and he will prove faithful to me.

But just as an athlete competing in the games, faces making some tough decisions and some serious sacrifices if he wants to finish the race, the writer says, 'and so will we'. Verse 1 again, 'Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, *let us also* lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely.'

Throw off what hinders

Now, the truth is that there is stuff that can hinder you running this race of the Christian life, there is stuff that can trip you up, and in a race with such eternal consequences you can't afford to give that stuff space, you've got to throw it off. And the writer splits this stuff that hinders into two groups: 'let us lay aside every *weight*, and *sin* which clings so closely.'

So first up, there are weights. And this is stuff that isn't necessarily sinful, but neither is it helpful. It hinders you. It's not wrong, in and of itself, and it may not be an issue for anyone else, but it is for you. It's a weight, and it drags you down, it slows your progress, it saps your energy. And the word he uses for weight was used in athletic circles for, guess what? Weight: excess body weight, fat; which

the athlete needed to shed if he was serious about competing. For anyone else, for the couch potato watching at home, that spare tyre might not be an issue, but for a serious competitor, it's got to go.

So, this isn't sin, but it is something that hinders your walk, or rather your run with Jesus. It might be a certain possession that consumes your time, or a hobby, or a sport, or a friendship. Not wrong in itself, but it's impeding your progress and the writer says, 'come on, it's got to go.'

Now, how do you decide what is or is not a weight? And the answer is, he doesn't tell us, does he. He doesn't give us a 7 point sermon on weight spotting. And the reason for that is that there are no rules and what's a weight for me may not be for you and vice versa. But if as we stay open and sensitive to the Holy Spirit, he highlights things in our lives, as we feel him put his finger on stuff, and we sense him saying, this is hindering not helping, especially if we then fight over letting it go, that's probably a weight.

But then there's sin. And he hasn't got any particular sin in mind, he's talking about sin generally, so whether it's lust or greed or worldly ambition, or a critical tongue, or love of money, if you've got this area of your life that is consuming your energy and sapping your spiritual passion, and your time and energy is being put into this area, either to feed it or to keep it secret, or because it just eats away at you, it's like trying to run in an oversized wetsuit, filled with water, when what you need is some lycra running shorts. And just as an athlete strips off his baggy clothing before a race, the writer is saying, 'come on, let's get serious about holiness, let's identify those areas that are hindering and let's let them go, strip them off and let's run.'

Run with endurance
Verse 1: 'and let us run with endurance the race marked out for us.'

Now, far be it from me to comment, but Mark has told me, more than once, that he's an endurance athlete. Well, if he's an endurance athlete, I'm an endurance pastor, who has to endure Mark talking about cycling every day.

Well, the Christian life is not a sprint is it? It is an endurance event. Now, some people may start out thinking it is a sprint: they start well, there's lots of noise and you know they're around, and they run well for the first few hundred metres, but then things start getting hard and running for Jesus doesn't seem so much fun, it's not as easy as they thought it was or as easy as they were led to believe. And their enthusiasm for the race starts to flag, and before long, they've dropped out of the race.

And the Christian life, this race that is set before us, is not an Ursain Bolt 100m sprint, with all the razzmatazz and showmanship. It's a long distance, endurance race. And it can be really hard, and it requires effort and energy and there are going to be times when your body is screaming out, 'I can't go on'. So when you experience times like that, don't think something strange is happening to you, that's normal. It's why Paul taught the early Christians that 'through many

hardships we must enter the kingdom of God' (Acts 14:22). And that is what the friends he is writing to are experiencing, when staying faithful to Jesus costs you. When letting go of weights that hinder you, is painful. When dying to sin, is like dying. When the Christian life is like an endurance race.

So, there is nothing here of 'just let go and let Jesus.' This is running with endurance, enduring the trials, enduring the times when friends quit the race, or you feel like quitting, enduring the temptation to hang on to weights and sins, enduring the criticisms from others.

And the question, of course is, how can you do that? I mean the endurance runner, the endurance cyclist, they have their carefully designed regimes, their unique electrolyte enriched drinks, their team doctors and their sports masseurs. But where are you and I supposed to turn for the inner strength and resources that will help us last the distance? Well, the writer tells us.

Look to Jesus

Verse 2: 'Let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith.'

So, just like the runner, if he's to run the distance, keeps the finish line and the prize in sight, we need to fix our eyes on Jesus. And when he says that, the word he uses, means looking to Jesus rather than anything else.

You see, there is a way of looking at something or someone that refuses to look elsewhere. It's like a horse with blinkers on, no sideways glances. It's like on the beach, in the summer, and you've made the decision to be a man with eyes for one woman and one woman only, your wife, but there are all these less-than-well-covered distractions, so you say, 'ok, I won't look there, and nope, can't look there either, so I'll just look straight ahead or if necessary at my feet', and you screen everything else out.

And the writer's saying, 'and run looking to Jesus, nothing else, no distractions – letting him fill your gaze, because he's the finish line, he's the prize, he's the reward.' And if you try and run looking over here, or over here, distracted by this or that, thinking I'd rather be doing this, or I want to give my attention to that, it is inevitably going to trip you up, and you'll end up on your face.

But what does it mean to look to Jesus? Because this isn't just about having some kind of right theological perspective on life and faith, is it? You can have all your doctrine sorted, you can have it all nailed down, you can spot a heretic at a hundred paces, and sadly talk and think very little about Jesus. Because the truth is, as Su's dad one told me, you can be thoroughly orthodox and thoroughly dead. Devoid of the life and joy of the Spirit. And when the writer talks about looking to Jesus, he's talking about a depth and richness of relationship with Jesus – that's going to be built on right theology, right thinking about him, and on prayer – a relationship that feeds your soul and gives you energy and stamina to endure even when the going's hard. You see, the saints in the stands, they may inspire

you by their example, but it's only Jesus who can give you that inner strength you need for all that the race can throw at you.

And the writer tells us how Jesus does that. He describes him as the founder and perfecter of our faith. And that word founder can be translated in any number of ways. You could say, as different translations do, He's the pioneer of our faith, or the forerunner, or the pacesetter, or the leader, or the champion, or the originator, or the author, or the source. In other words, it's by looking to Jesus, and following after him, and receiving from him, and drinking deep from him, that we will receive all that we need for the race of life.

But he's not just the founder and the source, he's also the perfecter of our faith. And if you have ever felt like quitting the race, or ever fear you might, that should sound like great news to you, because it means that if Jesus is the perfecter, ultimately it isn't down to you or me to get across that line.

I mean, just take a look at your life now. You know you're not perfect don't you. Now I know there are those times of self-delusion when we think 'hmm, Martin Slack isn't doing so badly' but you'd only have to talk to Su Slack to get a rather different take on things. But when that self-delusory mist clears, we know we are anything but perfect. Yes, we see progress and for that we are deeply thankful, but deep down we know that if this was down to you and me, the outcome would be anything but certain.

And the writer says, 'and the great news is that it doesn't depend on you.' Jesus is the perfector of your faith. What he's started in your life, he will finish, he will bring it to perfection, and it's by keeping on looking to him as your source, for everything that you need, that he will bring his work to completion, on the day you cross that line.

And Jesus is the supreme example of faith that endures through trials: verse 2, 'who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame.' Now more than once going through Hebrews we've said that putting your faith in Jesus gives you no free pass on suffering, that there are zero promises for an easy life. But there are wonderful, incredible promises of joy, deep, lasting joy, in this life and in the next. And knowing that joy, looking forward to that joy, Jesus endured the cross.

And look how the writer describes the cross. He calls it shame: Jesus endured the cross and despised its shame.And of course that is exactly what the writer's friends are facing, public shame if they continue to identify as Christians, and Jesus has been there. He didn't just ignore the shame, He despised it. When compared to the joy that lay ahead, the shame of the cross was nothing, it was worthy of contempt. And in comparison to the joy before us, Paul describes our present troubles, as just light and momentary afflictions (2 Cor 4:17).

But just look at that word shame. Because whether you were a Jew or a Roman, crucifixion was, without any doubt, the most shameful of deaths. For the Jew it was the same as being hung on a tree… and the law was clear, the one who is

hung on a tree is cursed by God. For the Roman, crucifixion was the penalty reserved for the lowest of the low, forbidden to be executed upon a citizen, because of its shame. It was public, the victim was stripped naked, and hung up to die in prolonged agony. It was horribly, deeply shameful.

Now, just think that shame thing through. Why would anyone make that up? If you were to concoct some stories surrounding an itinerant preacher in the backwaters of the Roman Empire, and you wanted to try and persuade both Jews and Romans that he was someone special, the Son of God even, why would you invent this, the shame of the cross as the centre point of the story? Imagine trying to sell that to the world. Even the world's best advertising agency would have a job on their hands! You want people to pledge allegiance to this man, even risking their lives for him… I know, let's have him die the most unspeakably shameful death we can imagine, let's have him crucified, that'll persuade folk.

No. The reason the New Testament writers talk of the shame of the cross is because this is what happened.

But take that thought a bit further. The first disciples of Jesus were all Jews. Strict monotheists… there is only one God. And here is Jesus, dying the death of one accursed by God. Now, having died so shameful a death, what on earth could have persuaded such men that Jesus of Nazareth was in fact God? What on earth could have happened to persuade them that this man, so deeply shamed, was God incarnate, and worship him as such? You know, the only thing that could have done that, is exactly what they say did it… and that's the resurrection.

It's the only thing that can explain why, to a man, these Jewish men gave their lives proclaiming that the once shamed Jesus was worthy of our everything. It's the only thing that can explain why to these men, the shame of the cross became something to glory in; because at the cross out of his love for us, he was taking our shame, upon himself. He was shamed so that in place of shame we might know his love and grace and forgiveness and mercy, and joy all the days of your life. And then the writer says, verse 2, 'he is seated at the right hand of the throne of God,' job done.

And knowing his love for you, knowing that he has done everything that needed to be done for you, knowing that he has taken your shame away, allowing that to sink in, will give you the strength and the joy you need for the race ahead.