

“Running in God’s Name”

A Sermon for the Fifth Sunday after The Epiphany (B)

7 February, 2021

“ . . . They shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint.” — Isaiah 40:31

Whenever I hear these words from Isaiah, from our first reading, I can’t help but think of the film—wait for it!—Chariots of Fire (as you know, a perennial favorite of mine). In it, the Scottish runner Eric Liddell reads them from the pulpit of a church in Paris on the very morning on which he had been scheduled to run a race at the Olympic Games in 1924. He had refused to run, citing that day as the Lord’s Day, and thus a day of rest.

In a hastily assembled ‘inquisition’ (as he termed it) intended to change his mind, he had told the Prince of Wales, his future monarch: “God makes countries and God makes kings, and laws by which to govern. And His law says, ‘My Day is Holy.’ And I for one intend to keep it. I will not run, and that’s final!”

Seeking to defend this firm stand—which many considered a blow to national pride, and Liddell himself something of a traitor—he chooses as his text on that morning the words of Isaiah 40, words that depict the relationship between God and the earthly realm in the starkest and most compelling language (and I’ll employ the King James Version he uses on that occasion!):

“Behold, the nations of the earth are as a drop of a bucket, and are counted as less than nothing, and a vanity. . . . He bringeth princes to nothing; he maketh the judges of the earth as a vanity. . . . Hast thou not known? Hast thou not heard, that the everlasting God, the Lord, fainteth not, neither is weary? . . . He giveth power to the faint, and to them that have no might he increaseth strength. . . . For they that wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings as eagles; they shall run and not be weary; they shall walk and not faint.”

The message couldn’t be clearer, or more indicting. The powers of king and country had sought to sever his life’s pursuit from his deep-held principles, his running from his faith; when in fact the two were inseparable, and informed and nourished each other. Moreover, they were the direct gift of a loving God who takes pleasure in seeing such gifts planted in the human soul and used to God’s glory. As Liddell himself would declare early in the film: “So where does the power come from, to see the race through to its end? It comes from within.”

Now refusing to run a race on Sunday may seem to us—who do everything else on Sunday!—a very small matter, and not enough to invoke the power and pleasure of God. Yet for Liddell his decision represented but a symbol of something larger. It was an affirming metaphor (like the race itself) for a way of thought and life, a journey guided by the knowledge that only God can provide the courage, only God can strengthen the will and inflame the desire in us to accomplish great things—and not just for the sake of a gold medal—things that will feed and protect and exalt God’s creation; things that will (as the old but true saying goes) ‘leave the world a better place than as we first found it.’

I know, this may seem so basic a moral idea, even simplistic, if not obvious. And yet, think of it,

given all the struggle and tumult in our national life today, all the pain and fear and suffering going on around us (and perhaps being absorbed intimately by some of us), I wonder if Isaiah's ancient oracle, and for that matter Eric Liddell's singular example, has nor as great an importance now as ever?

For we have only recently witnessed what damage can be done when loyalty to one cause or one theory or one man, one party or one tribe, takes the place of loyalty to the only One who can save us, the only One who can heal us, the One who consecrates all our works of hand and heart, the One who "giveth power to the faint, and to them that have no might, increaseth strength."

I recently read an article praising young Amanda Gorman for the poem she recited at the Inauguration just a few weeks ago—a poem, as you know, that I also admire. Yet for the writer it seemed that the poem's value rested principally in that the poet didn't need to invoke God or reference any faith tradition in order to inspire hope in the country's future. The writer went on, by contrast, to count (it seemed with some dismay) the number of times that President Biden used the word 'God' or quoted from scripture to underscore the message of his Inaugural Address.

Now, don't get me wrong. I appreciate that persons who ascribe to no religious faith, or who don't believe in God at all, can and sadly do feel excluded from a discourse espousing values that every human being should be able to share. And, God knows, these days so-called religious people are often the last ones to claim pride of place. Give me a principled atheist any time over a smug Christian!!

And yet I wonder if the writer unconsciously was approaching this occasion (and perhaps the President himself) in the same way the Olympic committee sought to deal with Eric Liddell a century ago—to sever personal commitment from a defining faith. By all accounts, Joe Biden is who he is, and has aspired to what he has sought, because of his faith in God, as was the case with Eric Liddell.

Indeed, we only have to read the words or recall the lives of persons like Martin Luther King or John Lewis to know how indivisible faith and action were for them, and for so many who marched to the banner of civil rights and in the cause of human freedom throughout history. King and Lewis and Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Oscar Romero, to name just a few, did not in the end brave death solely out of love of country or in defense of some partisan position.

Each risked (and some gave) everything they had for the sake of the God Isaiah names and in the furtherance of a cause larger than one nation or man or ideology. Each declared by their witness, and by the grace of their courage, what the prophet reminds a wearied people recently returned from exile: "Have you not known? (he asks) Have you not heard? The Lord is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth."

It's true, we have much to do to heal our land and our planet physically and morally. But first, I think, we have much to do in toppling the idols we have put in place of that everlasting God, the "Creator of the ends of the earth." These would be the idols of party and personality, of wealth and privilege; the idols of suspicion and selfishness and baseless fear; the idols of racial

superiority—all those heathen gods that have divided our communities, destroyed lives, poisoned our friendships (and often our families); that have made us forget where and from whom the power lies.

Toward the end of *Chariots of Fire*, Eric Liddell is preparing to run the race he exchanged with a teammate who had run in his place on that Sunday morning. As was his custom, he's seen shaking hands with the other runners. The American runner Jackson Schultz—who though a rival admires Liddell's stand of conscience—tells a teammate to “watch out” for him. Why, the other runner asks—“Coach says no problem.” Shultz replies, “Liddell's got something to prove, something personal, something people like Coach wouldn't understand in a million years.”

His warning turns out to be true. In the final scene, in the race itself, Liddell quickly leaves the rest of the runners behind—at the end his arms askew and waving in front of him, his mouth open, and a look of ecstatic joy on his face (which is how people who actually saw Liddell compete described his unorthodox running style!)—with each pace proving what was said by the prophets of old. And the same can be said of us now—we who have something to prove as well, something deeply personal—if we but hold fast to the source of OUR power to see the race through to its end, the power that lives within:

“For they that wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings as eagles; they shall run and not be weary; they shall walk and not faint.” Amen.

Blessings,
Fr. Gordon +