

SEPTEMBER 2016

Dear Friends,

'The Olympic Dream'

For much of August the Olympic Games at Rio has dominated the news. It has even at times taken precedence over terrorist attacks in cities like Bangkok, the horrific siege of Aleppo, and the current turmoil within the Labour Party. What are Christians to make of this national obsession with sport?

There is of course a positive and widely recognised link between sport and religion. The apostle Paul made use of it on a number of occasions, when he compared the followers of Jesus to athletes running in a race (cf 1 Cor.9:24ff, Gal.2:2). The same spiritual qualities of focused discipline, courage and team-work are important in both, and indeed it was with the aim of promoting such qualities that Victorians like Thomas Arnold, the famous Head Teacher of Rugby School (1828-41), began to use games like rugby to cultivate these qualities and to nurture 'good Christian gentlemen'. Around the same time many clergy became involved in sporting provision, in order to direct people away from the evils of drinking and gambling towards what they saw as more positive pursuits. The majority of English football clubs in the 1870s were for such reasons sponsored by churches!

But unfortunately the growing commercialisation of sport in the early 20th century put paid to all that. What had once been a game was now big business. Sporting stars were professionals doing a job, the promotion of sporting values like fair play were no longer a priority, and winning trophies was increasingly viewed by management as more important than the provision of exciting, enjoyable games.

The influence of commercialism upon the Olympic Movement has been different but still significant. We pay lip service, for example, to its aim 'to contribute to building a peaceful and better world by educating youth through sport practiced without discrimination of any kind and [with] ... mutual understanding, ... a spirit of friendship, solidarity and fair play,' but when we look at the news coverage in our papers and television screens, it is clear that our main concern is over Team GB's position in the medals league table and the success or failure of individuals within that team. It is right to celebrate the enormous achievement of our athletes, the skill, courage, dedication and effort which they have displayed. But what does global 'solidarity and fair play' really mean in a Games where those at the top of the medal table are all from the wealthiest and most advanced countries? And can we honestly say that we are helping to build a 'peaceful and better world', when countries like Brazil are pressurised to spend more money than they can afford on building state of the art facilities which may well become white elephants, and when the poorer people of such countries are made to feel ignored and excluded by the high price of the tickets?

Commercialism, I suspect, has led us to take sport too seriously. The best games and races are those which are entered competitively but in a spirit of friendship and fair play, and with a genuine recognition that 'it is only a game' and not a matter of life and death. Play is a gift from God, a gift which at the end of the day we should simply enjoy. We should not need to prove or justify ourselves by our sporting prowess; we should live by grace – in the knowledge of God's unmerited love.

HB

SOME DIARY DATES:

- Sun. 4th Sept. 10am Family Service with Holy Baptism
- Sat. 10th Sept. Heritage Weekend & Kent Churches 'Ride and Stride'
Friends of All Saints Church Open Day
1.30pm Church Jumble Sale
- Sun. 11th Sept. 10am Education Sunday Service with Snodland C of E
Primary School (new national date)
- Tues. 13th Sept. 7.30pm PCC meeting
- Sat. 1st Oct. Parish Harvest Supper
- Sun. 2nd Oct. 10.00am Harvest Family Service with Holy Baptism
3.00pm Harvest Thanksgiving at St Benedict's Church
Paddlesworth
6.00pm United Deanery Flower Festival Evensong at East
Peckham (No evening service at All Saints Church)