

On Your Marks!

Do you remember running a race at some point in your lives, perhaps at school – you may have loved it and some may have hated it.

One race in particular, that I remember running, was when I was at the end of first year, and it was the annual school sports, and I was running the 400 yards race, so that tells you how long ago it was.

It was once round the outside of a rugby pitch.

I was running against my good friend, at that time, Dougald. Me and Dougald played for the school rugby team, he was Inside Centre and I was Outside Centre.

We were both competitive. Dougald was the type of guy, who would say to me, at five o' clock, let's go for a 30 minute run before teatime so that we will have a good appetite, and off we went.

I remember the race well, we all lined up at the starting line, listening for those infamous words, *on your marks, ready, steady, go!*

And we were off, Dugald sprinted off like a greyhound chasing a rabbit; at 200 yards, he was out of sight, 100 yards, ahead of everyone else.

But out of the side of my eye, I noticed Dougald starting to tire, and by the time we reached 300 yards, we were running alongside each other, and by the time I reached the finishing line, Dougald was trailing well behind me.

I remember Dougald being met by his dad, who said, to him, "I told you to stay behind John MacGregor, until the finishing straight".

Running a race is a theme that is common in the Scriptures. The Christian faith is often spoken of as a race.

In the Old Testament, the prophet Isaiah, speaks about young men running and growing tired and weary, and even stumbling and falling, but he writes, "Those who wait on the Lord will renew their strength, they will soar on wings like eagles, they will run and not grow weary and walk and not faint."

Those who wait on the Lord or those whose trust is in the Lord.

There are times in all of our lives, when we grow tired and weary. It's a human condition, that we all face. It's good to remember that the Christian life is a marathon and not a sprint.

Being a Christian doesn't exclude us from tiredness and weariness.

Our Lord Jesus faced tiredness; in the midst of a storm, in the stern of a boat, he was found sleeping. A sure sign of tiredness. Yes, He is the Son of God, but he was also human like me and you. Some of you may feel this morning tired and weary – you've been in a storm, just like the disciples on the boat and you need rest, and rest is vitally important.

When Elijah the prophet was on the run from Queen Jezebel, he reached his lowest point and was so tired that he wanted to die. What did God do for him, He supplied him with food and got him rested.

Today marks the first Sunday of Lent and we gather as God's people to be encouraged to continue to run the Christian race.

The writer to the Hebrews wrote, 12 v3 “Consider him who endured such opposition from sinners, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart”.

Consider Him...This is what Lent is about, considering Jesus who endured such opposition.

So today we do precisely that – with Mark's gospel.... “On your Marks!”

Mark's gospel is succinct, he gets to the point quickly, no flowery language, just pictures of Jesus, a bit like a Powerpoint story.

Mark creates in the minds of his hearers visual images that will enable them to continue the Christian life.

So, Let us consider Jesus.

Firstly, Jesus is introduced at the river Jordon, with his cousin John the Baptist, and he sees heaven being torn open and the Holy Spirit descending on him like a dove. I think this photo catches the moment well. What a moment for our Lord.

Friends, this is a spectacular start to the ministry of Jesus. This is how Mark introduces our Lord and instantly we know that something wonderful is about to happen.

A voice comes from heaven, “This is my Son with whom I am well pleased”.

What a moment for Jesus, what a start to his ministry. Confirmation that he was God's Son and that God was pleased with him. There are times in our lives, when we have those heavenly moments, when God seems so close,

when heaven and earth kiss, it may be at high points in our lives, when the sun seems to shine on us and we feel God's pleasure and presence.

Think of a time, that you felt God's touch on your life...It's good isn't it!

How we would love to stay in that moment for ever...One day we will, for this is a glimpse into heaven. This is a window that we see God's blessing and this awaits all who follow Christ and do God's will. Good isn't it!

If only, we could stay there!

But Mark, doesn't linger, his next words are, "At once the spirit sent him out into the desert."

What a contrast!

Note, it is the spirit that sends Jesus into the wilderness.

This is a significant point, it's not the Devil that sends him out, rather it is the Spirit of God that has come upon him and sends him into his time of testing.

God's spirit sends Jesus out to face his adversary. Immediately we learn that this is why Jesus has come. Not to live in some sort of heavenly state, but to go alone into the wild where his mettle will be tested. He will face a barrage of temptations that will test who he is. The Devil wants to challenge Jesus' calling as the Son of God. Are you really the Son of God?

This story reminds me of the story of Adam and Eve, one moment in the Garden of Eden, and because of their sinfulness, they are sent into the wilderness, they're sent from the garden.

Jesus doesn't go into the wilderness because of his sin, but because of the sin of Adam and Eve, he goes to fight their battle, and so to fight our battle also, for we are all sons and daughters of Adam and Eve.

The wilderness...I'm sure that we've all been there at some point. Suddenly and without any warning, we've been driven into a wilderness, where we are alone, and we have to face up to the challenges that lie ahead of us.

This may come through illness, bereavement, family circumstances, and suddenly we have been sent spinning and into chaos, and our lives may lose their bearings, and we are at the mercy of the great unknown, vulnerable and fragile.

I'm sure we can all think of times in our lives when we have been in the wilderness, perhaps we are there now. Mark tells us that Jesus is even in the company of wild animals. This is not a Ben Fogle programme of going into the wild jungle, and living off the land, and everybody is happy; no, this is a picture of literally living on the surface of the moon with no one there – the Judean desert – surrounded by wild animals, a place of fear and desolation, but take heart and notice that Mark adds “and angels came to attend to him”.

That's beautiful, God did not leave Jesus entirely alone. The other gospel writers tell us that the angels came to Jesus after the temptations. They come to give him comfort, strength and support.

When we go through hard times, let us remember that God has not lost sight of us, even in the wilderness of our lives, God has angels, and these angels come in the most unexpected ways.

Look back and you will see times when you have been attended to by angels.

Mark's next slide is of Jesus beginning his calling of proclaiming the good news of God. He is an itinerant preacher, walking around his home region of Galilee, gathering people together and sharing with them, the wonderful message of God's grace and love. His message was simple, Mark sums it up in one sentence “The Kingdom of God is near, Repent and believe the good news!”

There was an urgency to his message, as the people of Israel waited with expectation for their coming Messiah. Their expectations were quite different – from a warrior to a king – but Jesus proclaimed something completely different. He came as the suffering servant; he came not to fight but to heal; not to be an aggressor but a peacemaker; he came to win souls for the Kingdom of God; to bring humanity from the wilderness into the Kingdom of God.

Jesus takes people on a spiritual journey. He makes them look inwards, into all the things that are not right in their lives and he says to his hearers, repent and believe, which simply means turn away, from the things you do wrong, turn away and do 180 degrees turn, and believe in me and walk in a new direction following me.

Repentance is a good word that brings health. It's an action that helps us walk closely to God.

Every one of us needs to repent. For we are all fallen and far from God. Jesus enables us to follow him when we repent of our sins.

Lent is a time for us to reflect and repent. A time of getting our lives right with God.

What do we need to repent of as we begin our lent journey. For each one of us, it will be different.

Here are some of the things that might weigh us down and keep us from following Christ:

Perhaps it's cruel words that hurt someone

Perhaps it's uncontrolled anger that intimidates someone

Perhaps it's pessimism that depresses someone.

Perhaps it's criticism that demeans someone

Perhaps it's bitterness that rejects someone

Perhaps it's selfishness that denies someone

Perhaps it's grudges that keep someone at arm's length.

The list is long but when we face up to our own particular sin and wrestle with it as Jesus wrestled with temptation in the wilderness, we don't do it in our own strength. His angels are there to help us.

Jesus' message, has not changed, it's still the same "repent and believe for the Kingdom of God is near."

The Kingdom of God is near. It's an invitation from Jesus to draw near to Him this Lent. To turn away from our past, repent and believe, and turn to him for forgiveness and the strength to go forward in his Kingdom.

The consequences of living for Jesus bring us, love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law, writes the Apostle Paul.

That is what it means to live in the Kingdom, it's a battle fought in the wilderness of our lives but a battle that brings into God's Kingdom, and brings peace into our hearts.

One of my favourite famous Scottish people of all time is Eric Liddell.

There are a few reasons for this.

1. His talent as a sportsman – Olympic gold medalist. Scottish International rugby player
2. His integrity as a Christian. He refused to compromise his beliefs by running an Olympic final on God's holy day.
3. His sacrificial life – He went into the darkest of places in China to shine God's light as a missionary, giving up fame and fortune. But what speaks to me more than all these other points, is that he was prepared to lay down his life for others, and he did in a Japanese prisoner of war camp – Winston Churchill organized for a prisoner exchange but Eric sacrificed his own freedom by allowing for another person to go home to be with her family.

Eric lived a life of moving towards the cross of Jesus. In fact, he is quoted as saying, “Many of us are missing something in life because we are after the second best, I put before you what I have found to be the best - one who is worthy of all our devotion - Jesus Christ. He is the Saviour for the young and the old. Lord, here I am!”

This year marks the 100th anniversary of his gold medal in Paris.

Jesus called him to a life of going forward in the Christian faith, for he knew that it was a life of blessings, a life of grace, a life of peace. This was his greatest race, not his Olympic triumph.

Today begins our first Sunday of Lent.

We enter a journey of preparation for Easter, an important journey, as we take time to reflect upon our own spiritual lives and ask deeper questions about our faith and relationship with God.

So, let us travel together, on our Lent journey, a journey to the Cross. Let us be people that are willing to repent and believe the good news of Jesus Christ.

Let us journey to the Cross and go with God's promise in your life, that he is with you, and will strengthen you.

On your marks, get ready, steady, go!

Amen