

Keep on Running

Hebrews 11:29-12:3

How many of you saw the amazing swim by Kyle Chalmers in the men's 100 metres freestyle? How exhilarating it was to see 18-year-old Kyle Chalmers, a Year 12 student of my old school, Immanuel College in Adelaide, mow down the field in the second 50 metres and touch in first. He's only a year or two older than those of you who are being confirmed today. This is a special day for you, as you confirm the call that God made on your lives in baptism. You share this highpoint in your faith journey with family, friends and fellow St Paul's disciples.



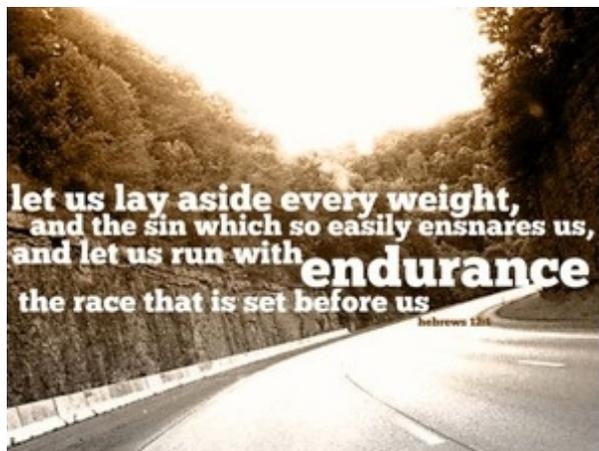
You've all been in spiritual training since your baptism. Some of it has been in formal events that we've run at St Paul's: children's ministry, Bible Song as it was called when you were at that age and stage. Two of you were baptised in recent years, and have hooked into Head to the Heart and then the Confirmation milestone. Confirmation is certainly a day that is the culmination of much spiritual learning and effort, like an Olympic race.

How apt it is that our second reading today is tailor made for this day: "Since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses...let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us."

These were fellow students at Immanuel College, cheering Kyle on. A great cloud of witnesses. You also have family and friends, godparents, mentors, school friends, members of St Paul's. All here to cheer you on as you reach this milestone in your faith journey. But the most important training has actually taken place every day: in your home where faith is talked about, practised, prayed and lived out.



The 100m men's freestyle final may have been the most important race of Kyle Chalmers' life, but it won't be his last. Now that he's a gold medallist in the blue ribbon event of swimming, he will face challenges to his crown. Other people will want to occupy the prime position on the podium. He will need to continue to train, even harder, in order to improve on what he has done.



What is true physically is also true spiritually.

Confirmation Day is another day in the ongoing journey of faith. And just as physical fitness needs to be maintained through hard work and discipline, so does faith fitness. Hebrews gives us some good advice about how to keep in peak spiritual condition: "Let us lay aside every weight, and sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of our faith."

I love the pre-race ritual that swimmers go through. They casually saunter along the side of the pool to the area behind the start. They are wearing tracksuits, and some of them have headphones in to block out the sound of the crowd and keep them in the zone. They wave to the crowd as they are introduced. Then they stretch and limber up. Then it's time to get serious. Off comes the headphones, tracksuit top and pants. They are down the essentials: swimsuit, cap, goggles. It's all on the line. They are ready to race.



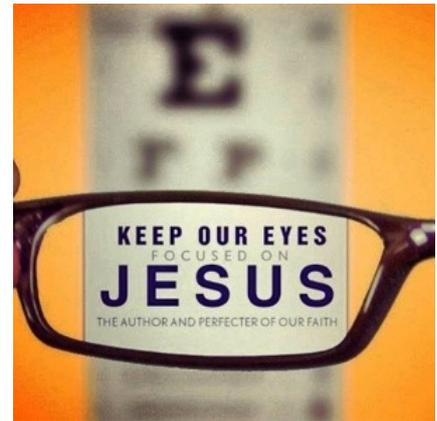
What are some of the weights that we carry that drag our faith down?

- We're so busy, all the time, and not just adults, but younger people too, that we just don't have time to listen to God, even to pray.
- Our ears are so full of the message that we have to reach our full potential, and map out our own destiny, and choose our own values and meaning to life, and that we can achieve anything we want, that we are scared of making a huge mess of it..
- Our eyes are dazzled by all the stuff and experiences we're told we should have, and we want more and more, because that's what a successful life looks like.
- We get disheartened because the world is increasingly and assertively rejecting the church, and the Christian world view, and we cop it too because we say that we follow Christ.

And then there's the sin that clings to us like Velcro.

- The same temptations we fall prey to, again and again. Why can't we get better?
- Our inner selfishness that justifies ways that we know God doesn't want us to live.

Sometimes, perhaps often, we struggle, and we wonder if we will be able to continue in the race, let alone complete it. Hebrews gives us some great spiritual training advice: “Let us look to Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith...” When we look at Jesus, what do we see? Is he a spiritual super-athlete, who’s always in gold-medal winning form, and whose perfection crushes us because we can never measure up?



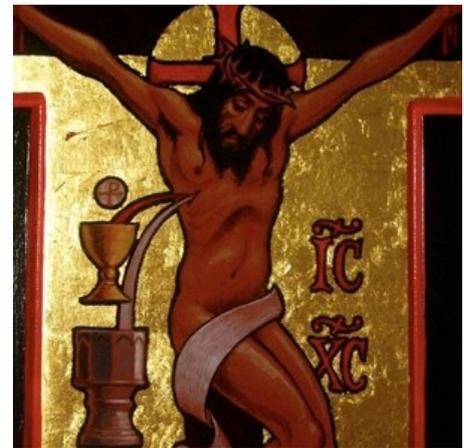
No, he’s nothing like that. God didn’t send his Son, Jesus, to become a human being to shame us; rather, Jesus lives to save us and rehabilitate us. First of all, Jesus is the author of our faith. He is the originator. Our faith piggybacks on his faith and trust in his heavenly Father, and his faithfulness to the race that only he could run. We read today: “For the sake of the joy that was set before him, [Jesus] endured the cross, disregarding its shame...” The cross was Jesus’ crowning glory, where God’s love triumphed over sin and hate. It was a strange, unexpected victory, because it looked for all the world like failure, but this was the sacrifice that enabled God to win us

back to himself. And the resurrection was like the victory ceremony, where God confirmed that Jesus had won, fair and square. Jesus is the perfecter, or completer. And he didn’t just finish the race a winner, but he now shares that victory with us, through his Holy Spirit.

I got quite excited when Kyle Chalmers won. Both because I’m an Australian, but also because I went to the same school as him, a very long time ago, I might add. Yet there is a sense of shared joy in his achievement.

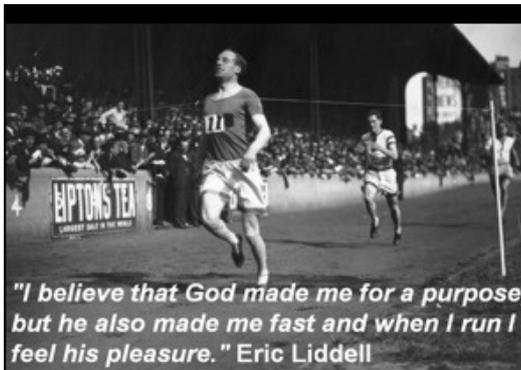
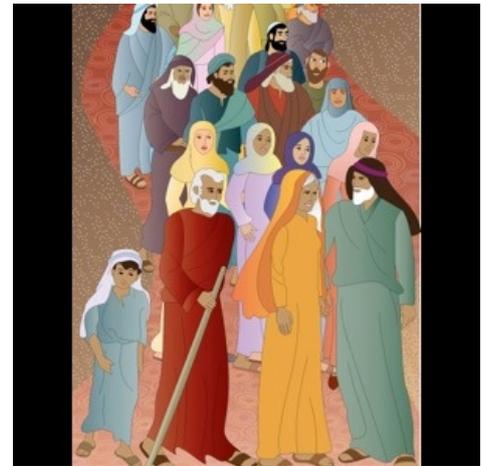
But we share something much more powerful and tangible with Jesus. In our baptism, Paul reminds us, “we were...buried with Christ through baptism into his death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life.”

I don’t have a gold medal. I have something better, more valuable, more enduring. You and I share in the victory of Jesus. Jesus willingly took my lack of performance, my slackness, my sin, and I receive the prize of his new life. I am a changed person through the presence of his Holy Spirit. I know without any shadow of a doubt that he is with me for the long haul. From Confirmation Day onwards, in the case of our confirmees, to the day when God, in his faithfulness, takes us to be with him. That will be the day when we will be amazed at how great a cloud of witnesses were surrounding us, and cheering us on.



“Consider Jesus who endured such hostility against himself from sinners, so that you may not grow weary or lose heart.” Sometimes athletes who retire have a very hard time of it. They are lost without the buzz of competition, without the cheering crowds and supportive coaches.

The same is true for Christians who lose sight of the point of their lives: the race of the faith and the goal of eternal life, and disconnect from the community of fellow disciples who run alongside them, encouraging them, lifting them up when they fall. All of us, not just today’s confirmees, need close connection with Jesus and with his people, so that we can continue to run, joyfully, consistently, a long obedience in the same direction.



Some of you may have seen the movie *Chariots of Fire*. It tells the story of Scottish athlete, Eric Liddell. At the 1924 Summer Olympics in Paris, Liddell refused to run in the heats for his favoured 100 metres because they were on a Sunday. He instead competed in the 400 metres, which he won. He once said: “I believe God made me for a purpose, but he also made me fast. And when I run I feel His pleasure.” God has made each one of you for a purpose — to share in his prize of eternal life, to feel his pleasure in making you his child, and to bring glory to him. Keep on running. Amen.