

Daniel's reflection for week beginning 25th September

Chariots of a More Sacred Fire

1962. A wet Sunday afternoon in Cork. Six of us were lined up for the All-Ireland 100 yards sprint final. There was a puddle in my lane, just where I was trying to secure my starting blocks. This was a huge blow to my chances of a 'flying start', of 'going with the gun'. Even though recently ordained, I cursed my luck. Then quietly, the athlete in the adjacent lane (with whom I had previously trained) simply said 'I have no chance of winning this race. You have. I'll switch lanes with you.' To this day, the memory of that generous gesture lifts my heart. If the roles had been reversed I would have been found wanting! Moments such as these give us hope in the human capacity for goodness and compassion. As it turned out, I only managed to take the bronze medal, but in retrospect I was enriched in a far deeper way.

Sport is about more than the medals, we like to think. Yet we see many examples of 'win-at-allcost' attitudes, of drug abuse and cheating, of desperate and extreme measures taken to capture that euphoric moment of golden glory before the eyes of millions. Many athletes have freely admitted they would sacrifice years of their lifespan for the sake of an Olympic (2016) medal.

Yet every now and then, when our faith in the human condition begins to waver, there will be a different kind of golden moment when the human spirit triumphs over the fierce attraction for the limelight. In the teeth of competition, there will be a flash of grace, a light of compassion, when an exceptional athlete transcends the will to win, and freely chooses to challenge another more subtle competitor – the powerful, persuasive rival within, the ego with no. 1 on its shirt. One such moment happened in the 1936 Berlin Olympic games. Jesse Owens was watching his dream slipping away. He had fouled his first two attempts at the long jump. His blond German opponent Ludwig 'Lutz' Long explained to him how he could avoid a final foul by using a simple strategy. Owens took his advice and went on to win the gold medal with a final leap of 9.06 metres. And Hitler stormed out of the stadium.

Moved by the spontaneous graciousness of his closest opponent, Jesse Owens later said: 'It took a lot of courage for him to befriend me in front of Hitler ... You can melt down all the medals and cups I have and they wouldn't be a plating on the twenty-four-carat friendship that I felt for Lutz Long at that moment.' . . .

It is to hidden moments and small miracles such as these that people often look for evidence of spontaneous goodness. They inspire glimpses of hope in a desperately competitive world, cameos of compassion in a ruthless society. These acts of altruistic love sustain the world. They are mostly unnoticed in the run of an ordinary day. Even when they happen in the crowded stadium, they have a shy invisibility about them. No chariots of fire await the heroes and heroines of the soul.

Why are some people capable of those astonishing gestures of pure compassion, these sudden epiphanies of love that never cross the minds of others? One afternoon in May 1988 on a hillside in Oakland, California, a grandson of Mahatma Gandhi was attempting to give us an answer. He pointed out that both as individuals and as a planet we are genetically coded for compassion, for karuna. 'Competition becomes combat', he called out, 'when compassion is absent.' . . .

A myth has it that racing angels entertained St Columba on Iona. God's delight was complete in the little skips and leaps of the boy Jesus over blocks of wood in his father's workplace. God is delighted too, St Irenaeus reminds us, wherever humanity excels itself. Christians see the Games as a celebration of both God and humanity – because ultimately these two mysteries are inseparable. Even heaven may tune in to watch! Between them, the Olympics and especially the Paralympics offer sacramental moments of possibility and self-belief to inspire millions of oppressed, disadvantaged and hopeless young hearts. They send signals for peace and liberation that reach out, through radio and television, to comfort and transform, if only for a moment, countless isolated souls in shattered communities where only war, greed and awful oppression prevail.

For all their inevitable flaws and failures, in this respect the Olympic Games have few rivals. They are watched by millions across our planet. The uniting power of the Olympic Torch tracing its way across the world, the pageantry of the opening and closing ceremonies, the many symbols, rituals and anthems, the will to weave as well as the will to win – for all too brief a moment, this banquet of beauty blesses each host country.

(Treasured and Transformed pp87-89)