

Daniel's reflection for week beginning 30th October

GOLD-DUST MEDALS

As Autumn's golden colours ring their own blessing, our Olympic champions enjoyed victory parades in Manchester and London. And memories of Summer glory return.

'Unbelievable', 'awesome', 'surreal' – words uttered by Andy, Becky, Jess and Mo, all medal-winners of the Olympics Games over for another four years. The papers are still full of ecstatic accounts and pictures of champions in a carnival city of sun, happy faces, colourful costumes and stunning natural scenery. Team GB, glinting with gold, has returned home to a welcome reserved only for super-heroes and heroines. Their faces, their shining eyes tell the story of a mission accomplished, a dream come true, lives transformed for ever. The memories of Rio will stay with many of us for a long time; they will stay forever with the champions.

What we know far less about is the agony, the loss, the despair of the losers. For every waving winner pictured against the beautiful blue mountains and sea, there were silent thousands with broken hearts.

The stories of their pain would never be told. Their four years of extreme, relentless preparation to reach that golden podium had failed. Whether by a touch, a nano-second, a moment of distraction, a split-second mistaken decision, the presence of cheats, makes no difference. Only three can fit on an unforgiving rostrum. Champions embrace their painfully-earned glory. Social media captures the adulation within the stadium, the cheering crowds in their home-town, and then the recognition that will follow them on the streets and cafes of the world. But what happens to those who try and fail, who have given years of their lives for a mirage, who come home with nothing but a sense of having let everyone down? Their hearts and dreams need repairing. How can this healing be attempted? Apart from the usual sympathetic noises, what do you say to such a soul if you know one, tanned by the Rio sun, but humbled by defeat?

The odds are the last thing they would want is a fervent discourse on St Paul's spiritual race to the line and his breasting of the tape of heavenly glory! Yet later, when the Olympic dust settles, is there any point in considering another kind of race for fulfilment - that inner daily striving that drives the hearts of those who reach for a different reward - to be complete human beings, to fall in love with God? There surely is something to be said about our deeper attraction and commitment to attain to that 'more lasting prize'.

In his letter to the Corinthians St Paul, referring to the first century Roman Games, was comparing the 'perishable' garland of Olympic victory which fades with the applause, to the lasting spiritual one that brings home to us the deeper awareness of our truest, authentic identity. He uses the phenomenon of the Games as an analogy for the inner race we are all running to win the gold of our sacred humanity, free from the drug and dross of false living, and from the powerful seduction of lesser awards. He asks whether our daily race is energised by our ego or by our essence.

There is a deep desire in all of us to be truly ourselves, the first and only golden goal of our human lives. But to be truly ourselves means to stop relying on something outside ourselves for happiness. The more we try to experience the abundant life without the crutch of 'secular' success, the more truly human we become. St Paul was well aware in his Olympic reference that just as it takes courage to face the void of failure and shame in the heady world of track and field, so too when we strip ourselves of those people and possessions we once thought essential for our lives to be complete.

We grow into our true selves not by adding more glitter to them but by letting go of the accumulations, the successes, the good name that we become dependent upon. These things can control our very lives. There is an innate addiction in everyone to status, to power, to important titles, to posturing, preening and posing, to popularity, to substances, to famous people. To be free we need to be sprung from such traps. And yet, and strangely, most of us are afraid to be free.

How many times did the utterly human Jesus find himself in such a milieu, facing the same challenging situations. He struggled in the desert of his soul with the demons of prestige, privilege and power. How often did he succumb to those demons? And how often did his good name lay in smithereens around him? In the three-position podium of Calvary Jesus came first all right – his bleeding hands raised not in triumph but in

pathetic disgrace. There was much winning and losing going on between the three competitors on the hill that night.

Maybe God reserves these ultimate challenges and defeats for the utterly committed ones. Maybe such disgrace is the final grace – the last ego-block removed, the last crutch kicked away, before we place our trust completely in the jealous heart of our human-God. Maybe coming home without a medal is, in the long run, the beginning of a journey home to the true self. And maybe therefore, for the true picture to emerge, the medals might be made of both gold and dust. The gold-dust medal would remind the winner that she has not won everything; it would remind the loser that he has not lost all.

For the Christian, success and failure are turned upside down. 'When I am weak then I am strong.' We must fall upwards, as writer Richard Rohr OFM puts it. We break out of our tombs only through first experiencing the pain of darkness. Those who failed at Rio may be closer to the truth after all. Depends how they handle the failure. Outwardly they may weep and bleed as they stumble on the Calvary path of broken dreams; inwardly their dust and ashes may be already shining with Easter gold.

Leonard Cohen, no stranger himself to triumph and tragedy, reflects on the paradox in his soulful 'Anthem':
'Ring out the bells that still can ring.

Forget your holy offering.

There is a crack in everything;

that's how the light gets in.'