**The Revd Alison M Bailie**

**Rector: Benefice of Middleton and Thornham**

**Tel: 0161 654 8120 Mob: 07446 289965 Email:** [**alisonmbailie@btinternet.com**](mailto:alisonmbailie@btinternet.com)

**FaceBook: Benefice of Middleton and Thornham**

3rd August 2021

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ

No doubt, you will have seen some of the TV coverage from the Olympics – the joy and celebration of the athletes on the podium holding tightly to their gold, silver or bronze medals, the disappointment and heartache of those who have just missed out, the honesty and courage of those who have spoken out about the pressure on their mental health. I am sure you will each have your favourite moment – I love horses, so mine was watching Charlotte Dujardin competing in the dressage competition on her horse Pumpkin, and seeing her joy and surprise when she gained her bronze medal.

However, win, lose or withdraw, every single athlete at the Olympics has been training for many years to achieve their goal – their opportunity to win that medal and to represent their country at the Olympics. Behind their moments of glory or of disappointment lie many hours, days, years of endeavour, effort and endurance. Many sacrifices will have been made, many opportunities turned down, many hard choices decided upon for the sake of achieving the greatest goal of all, their greatest desire – winning an Olympic medal.

The modern Olympic Games have their roots in ancient Greece. In fact, full of blood, passion and extraordinary feats of athletic endeavour, the Olympic Games were the sporting, social and cultural highlight of the Ancient Greek calendar for almost 12 centuries. This is the context in which Paul was writing to the church in Philippi in ancient Greece, a society in which athletic prowess and physical strength was highly valued. So when Paul wants to tell his readers of his greatest desire and his greatest goal – knowing Christ, growing in relationship with him, becoming more like him – he uses the picture of an athlete taking part in a foot race, maybe today the 100 or 200 metres. In Philippians 4.12-14, he writes: *But I press on to possess that perfection for which Christ Jesus first possessed me.  No, dear brothers and sisters, I have not achieved it, but I focus on this one thing****: Forgetting the past and looking forward to what lies ahead,  I press on to reach the end of the race and receive the heavenly prize for which God, through Christ Jesus, is calling us.*** (NLT)

The Greek stadium was U-shaped. The race started at the top of one end of the 'U', the athletes ran down one side, rounded the end and then ran to the finishing line at the top of the other end of the 'U'. In these verses , Paul says that he is forgetting what lies behind and is straining forward, just like an athlete in the foot-race. He is running full-speed with his body bent forward, hand outstretched toward the goal, and eyes fastened on the finishing line. He has just turned around the curve at the bottom of the 'U', and is now in the home stretch, where he can see the goal or finishing line. The athlete would never look back, as that would cause him to slow down, and to wander off track. Paul’s desire is to have the same level of commitment to the race of Christian life, with his eyes fixed on the finishing line where he will receive the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus.

What a challenge! When I look at the effort and intensity with which the athletes in Tokyo have approached their events, the rigorous training they have undergone, and the determination they have shown, I am in awe – and yet Paul says the business of being a Christian and running our race is just as serious, and far more important, than the races run in Tokyo this summer, for our race has eternal consequences. So, to run my race through life well, the race the Lord has marked out for me, what do I need to let go of? What do I need to leave behind? What is the one thing I need to focus on? What is my greatest goal and my greatest desire? Who are my eyes fixed on?

May the Lord give us grace to run the race He has marked out for us, fixing our eyes upon Jesus,  the champion who initiates and perfects our faith. That’s what it means for us to be winners!

With my love in Christ and my prayers

**Alison**

**Sunday 8th August 10.30**

St John’s 10.30 am All Age Communion

St Leonard’s 10.30 am All Age Communion

Zoom 6.30pm Service of the Word