

Personal but not Private

Thirtieth Sunday in Ordinary Time (Year C)

Every four years unless there is a major world crisis, the world unites to compete in what we know as the Olympics. The Olympics is a world competition that has grown to include more than 200 teams and thousands of participants from all over the world. The modern Olympics were inspired by a competition that took place in Olympia Greece from the 8th century BC to the 4th century AD. **St. Paul was very familiar with the ancient form of the Olympics, he refers to competition, training, and challenges in many of his letters.**

In today's letter to Timothy, Paul speaks of finishing the race and getting the crown of righteousness. While in the Olympics, you are competing against another person, or team for a medal, endorsements or bragging rights, Paul's race is not against others but against himself. The crown of righteousness that Paul refers to could be seen as salvation. Salvation is the crown, the prize of competing well and finishing the race, but not just any race, the race of life.

Going back to our catechism classes, many of us were taught that there are three main enemies of our souls: the world, our concupiscence, and the devil. These three enemies are our obstacles to finishing the race, they are the cause of many of us not receiving the crown of righteousness. When St. Paul speaks about competing well and finishing the race, he states **"I have kept the faith", persevering in faith until the end is the way to receive the crown of righteousness, the crown of salvation.** Therefore, even though St. Paul speaks of a competition, he is not competing against others, rather he is competing against himself, that is why our own Olympics, our competition is personal. You are not competing against others, where only one would win the race, on the contrary **the goal is for everyone to win their personal race, the goal is for everyone to persevere in faith to the end, the goal is for everyone to be crowned with salvation.** St. Paul states in the letter to Timothy that he will not be the only one awarded the crown but anyone who longs for Christ.

Our race is personal because our God is a God of justice, who judges justly. He will not judge you based on someone else's race, it's your race, your decisions, your journey. But although your journey is personal, it is not private, at times we might feel that all that matters is my personal relationship with God and that is it. But we were not created for isolation, we were made for community and as such even though our decision to follow is personal, our journey is not private. It is public because the way that we live affects those around us, our journey has an impact; positive or negative, but it has an impact. Jesus tells us in the gospels that we are to be the light of the world and the salt of the earth, by this he is implying that our faith shouldn't be private. Who would light a lamp and hide it under a basket? Equally if we are called to be the light of the world, it is, so that **his light shines through us and therefore it can't be private.**

Last week we heard a very interesting reading from the book of Exodus, where the people of Israel were fighting against Amalek's army. The interesting part was that for Israel to win,

Moses had to keep his hands raised, anytime he lowered them, Israel would start losing the battle. Since Moses couldn't hold his arms up for long and would get tired, Aaron and Hur, supported his arms so that they would remain raised. I see this as a great representation of how our journey is not private, because we need each other. As a community, we can help each other on our journey and even though our race is personal, the public aspect of it helps us persevere. **Instead of looking at each other as a competitor like in the modern Olympics, we need to see each other as collaborators or community.**

In today's gospel reading we find the story of the Pharisee and the tax collector and at the end we find that the tax collector is the one that goes home justified, not the Pharisee, **but why?** I could imagine that in his personal race, in his personal journey the Pharisee thought that he did everything right, he followed the law, he was not greedy, not dishonest, not adulterous and even fasted. I personally believe that part of his problem was that he fell into the danger of comparing his journey with others, where he felt that his crown of righteousness was going to be based on how well he competed versus others. In his eyes he was on the right path because he was not like the rest of them. The tax collector in turn went home justified, because he focused on his personal journey, he realized that he needed God, he repented, he didn't look at what others were doing or not doing but focused on his shortcomings.

We are not truly in a competition, we are on a journey called life, within this journey it is important to recognize that we have a personal aspect to the journey, and we also have a communal aspect to the journey. Our decision to follow, to persevere is part of the personal aspect of the journey, but we also need to remember that our journey is not private, as we are called to be light, to be salt, in other words to assist others on their journey. The gospel proclamation states that God entrusted his message of salvation to us... we can't save anyone but based on our perseverance, journey, and personal witness, we can help others find their way... **Where are you on your journey?**

If you find yourself running the race well, then help others who are struggling with their personal race.

If you find yourself struggling, disappointed, overwhelmed, distressed, don't despair, today's psalm reminds us that when the just cry out, the Lord hears them and rescues them from their distress... So, **call on him as the tax collector did "O God, be merciful on me a sinner' ... and surely you will also go home justified!**