

I would like to add one more verse to the NT reading. Hebrews 12.3: *Consider him who endured such hostility against himself from sinners, so that you may not grow weary or lose heart.*

One of the sporting highlights in my university is the annual inter-collegiate cross-country running race in winter. Durham University and its cathedral, being situated in a rather hilly area surrounded by a river, is an ideal place for cross-country running. There would be more than a hundred students entering the race. I also entered it. Before the actual race I had my daily exercise on the exact route. I noticed that after the final bend, climbing uphill, it came to the final stretch which was less than a half mile. Therefore I realized that as soon as I came to the final stretch, it would soon be over and I could enjoy a hot bath and a hot drink.

When the actual event came, I ran as best as I could. I wasn't in the front of the pack, nor was I in the rear; anyway, there were others with me. We tried to encourage other to keep going by reminding ourselves that it wouldn't be long to come to the final stretch and then it wouldn't be that much longer for us to have a hot bath and a hot drink.

But as soon as we came to the final stretch, suddenly we heard roaring noises. There were so many students standing on both sides of the road, clapping, cheering and shouting encouragement at us; of course they were supporting their own college friends respectively. They were lining up all the way to the finish line. While I was doing my daily exercise I hardly saw anyone. Now we were being treated as celebrities, though only for a few minutes.

Hebrews 12.1-3 draws on the image of Christian pilgrimage as a long-distance race, and the first is, obviously, the 'great cloud of witnesses' all around us. Those who have gone before us, from Abel and Abraham right through to the unnamed heroes and heroines noted at the end of Chapter 11, haven't simply disappeared. They are there at the finish line, cheering us on, surrounding us with encouragement and enthusiasm, willing us to do what they did and finish the course in fine style. The difference is, of course, that in a race the runners are competing against one another,

whereas in the journeying of God's people what matters most to each runner is that all the others make it safely home as well.

What must we do to run the race with efficiency and success? The writer continues the athletic imagery to suggest three things in particular.

First, we must get rid of any heavy weights that are slowing us down. Athletes sometimes train carrying heavy packs on their backs, to build up strength and energy against the time when, for the actual race, they will run without any extra weight at all. But far too many Christians try to run the race of Christian pilgrimage while carrying all kinds of heavy baggage – anxieties about trivial concerns, ambitions to use the Gospel as a means of self-advancement, resentments of other people, secret greed for the bodily appetites, and so on. In particular, it's possible for sin of one sort or another to get into the way and constrict our movement. The writer seems to have in mind the danger an athlete might face if the track isn't completely clear – something in the way, such as a hurdle or a bench. That's what sin can be like when Christians tolerate it in their lives or in the community. It gets in the way, it can trip you up, it can seriously damage your chance of completing the course.

The second point is that this race, like my university cross-country race, is a long haul and you need patience. There are always some runners who really prefer a short sprint; some of them, faced with a ten-mile run, will go far too fast at the start and then be exhausted after two or three miles. Sadly, many of us will know Christians like that too; keen and eager in their early days, they run out of steam by the time they reach mature adulthood, and by the time they're in the middle age or older they have either lost all energy for active Christian living or are frantically trying to recapture the zip and sparkle of a new, inappropriate, teenage-style faith.

The third point is to keep your eyes, or at least your imagination (when you're too far away to see!), fixed on the finish line and on the one who is at the centre of the cloud of witnesses, waiting there to greet you Himself. Jesus ran this course before us. In fact, He pioneered the way, opened up the course and brought it to a successful completion. Our task is to follow in His steps. He has made it across the finish line, and His encouragement, and the

thought of His welcome and congratulations at the end, are the central motivation for us to continue in hope, faith and patience.

Hebrews 12:1-3 invites us to contemplate what exactly Jesus went through on His own patient journey, and to realize that we have mostly had an easy time of it by comparison. He kept his eye on the joy that was waiting for Him - the joy of doing His father's will, of bringing His saving purposes to fulfillment – and He put up with the horrible torture of crucifixion as well as agonizing death. Now, as a result, He is in the key position of honour at God's right hand.

The Book of Hebrews is keenly aware that the readers are in danger of being weary with all that they are facing, day after day, in terms of threats, persecution, intimidation and mockery from contemporaries, their neighbours and perhaps their former friends. This is like the long haul up steep and muddy hill in the middle of long-distance race. They must keep going; they must remind themselves continually of the One who blazed this trail in the first place; they must think how much worse it was for Him. That way, they will be kept from becoming worn out completely. As so often in Christian life, reminding yourself of truth, not trying to conjure up feelings of this or that sort, is the way to keep going in faith and patience.