

Jeremiah 23.23-29, Hebrews 11.29-12.2, Luke 12.49-56

Darek was a pupil in the church primary school in my last parish. Several parents objected to his admission. He has Down's Syndrome. They were afraid the extra attention he needed would detract from their own children's education. Certainly his concentration was limited, but patient, specialised teaching worked wonders and from being a restless and sometimes disruptive child he was transformed into an attentive and well-behaved one. His contribution to the school was immense. He drew out affection and sensitivity from the other children, especially the little girls who fussed over him unashamedly. But at the annual sports evening I was alarmed when it came to the first year's race. One of the competitors was Darek. He would inevitably be last. There would surely be tears and tantrums. No-one put more energy into the race than Darek, his arms and legs flew in all directions and his determination was impressive. But he wandered all over the place and sure enough he finished long after all the others. He was only halfway when all the rest had completed the race. But the moment he crossed the finishing line was sheer magic. His face lit up, he waved his arms in triumph, he actually danced for joy. And we clapped and cheered as we had clapped and cheered for no other child. He had come in last, but if we had been asked to choose the hero of the evening it would have been Darek.

By the time I got home other thoughts were occupying my mind and I had forgotten about Darek. It was the next morning, saying my prayers, reviewing the previous day, that the memory of the race came flooding back and I found myself overwhelmed with emotion. I suddenly realised that Darek and I were not all that different. I too was disabled in the race I was running; I was often erratic, frequently falling, and, no matter how ardently I longed to be up there among the winners, if ever I crossed the line it would be as one of the stragglers. I also realised that in this race there are no losers. Everyone who makes it to the end receives the prize.

Some of you will have seen the film, *Chariots of Fire*. Its hero, Charles Liddell, as a child suffered a near-fatal illness which left his legs so stiff it was thought he would never be able to walk properly again let alone run. At the 1924 Olympics his style was a joke. Moastey, his American rival, said, *That lad Liddel's a hell of an awful runner, but he's got what it takes*. I suppose that *got what it takes* is the ability to pick yourself up after you've fallen, to brave humiliation and to risk coming in last of all. The Olympic runner and the handicapped child are not all that different. Today's epistle reminded me of them both: *Wherefore seeing we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witness, let us lay aside every weight and the sin which does so easily beset us, and let us run with patience the race that is set before us, looking unto Jesus the author and finisher of our faith.*

It's a picture of the Greek games, maybe from the Olympic. The runners are stripped, their encumbering robes have been discarded. The arduous course lies before them. Their only thought is to win. Cheering them on is a great heavenly crowd, as involved in the race as much as they are.

There is a moment, celebrating the Eucharist, when I often feel myself in danger of seizing up, when I have to take a deep breath and get a grip on myself. It's at the words: *Therefore with angels and archangels and all the company of heaven.* That is the moment when, no matter how few there may be in the visible congregation, I know myself to be surrounded by an invisible host. And they are involved, involved not in order to criticise, to condemn our frequent failures, to exult at our all too many falls, but to strengthen, encourage, assist and to cheer us on.

Let me tell you about Billy Yeoman. When I knew him Billy was an old man. He'd been a farm labourer all his life. He was as rustic as his name. Those who had known him in his youth said no-one could handle a scythe better than Billy. With his legs astride, like two pillars, he could make short work of any field of corn. When I knew Billy he was in a nursing home. His scything days were over. Both his legs had been amputated because of cancer and, like Darek, he couldn't read, he was blind. But he still had the fine voice which had got him into the village church choir. He loved Songs of Praise and he would join in the hymns unselfconsciously. One Sunday evening I was sitting next to him when he joined in the singing of Abide with me: *Hold thou thy cross before my closing eyes; shine through the gloom and point me to the skies: heaven's morning breaks and earth's vain shadows flee: in life, in death, O Lord, abide with me.* After it was over, he turned to me, *Aye*, he said, *that's the one for the last lap.*

Billy died not long after. I slept in his room on his last night and he went so peacefully I thought he was still sleeping. I didn't hear the sound of the trumpet when he crossed to the other side, but I'm sure Billy did.

What a strange team-selector our God is! What curious contestants he chooses for his Olympics! What strange material he takes hold of in order to make his saints! *Not many wise men after the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble are called; but God has chosen the weak things of the world, and base things of the world and things which are despised hath God chosen, yes, and things which are not.* People such as Darek and Charles Liddell and Billy Yeoman and you and me.

*Therefore with angels and archangels,
and with all the company of heaven,
we laud and magnify thy glorious name,
evermore praising thee and saying,
Holy, holy, holy, Lord God of hosts,
heaven and earth are full of thy glory.
glory be to thee, O lord most high. Amen.*