

RUNNING THE RACE

(2 Timothy 4.6-18)

Years ago, a young Christian in London had a job working in the library of a major national newspaper. This newspaper kept files of old cuttings about every well-known person. The files were kept in rows of long shelves and were separated into 'living people' and 'dead people'.

One day, he was looking through the files of dead people and came across a large file marked 'Jesus Christ'. He glanced over his shoulder to check that no one was looking and quickly moved the file from the 'dead people' section to the 'living people' section.

He did that because Jesus was raised physically from the dead. Many people saw him alive, and countless millions have experienced his power in their lives since. He is as alive as you and I are – in fact, more so!

For this reason, this bereavement service, though obviously poignant and sad, can have a note of hope and even joy – because the resurrection means that death is not the end.

All of us here today are here because we have at some time gone through a journey of grief – some of us are still in it now – and we all have to come to terms with loss. I hope this service will help you move forward in that journey. The focus today is remembering and treasuring and honouring the loved ones who have gone before us. But I want, this year, to say a few words about ourselves.

From time to time, I visit people in nursing homes. Some of these places are better than others. In the more soulless ones, you see rooms full of people who appear to have lost the will to live.

Someone has said, "You don't stop laughing because you grow old; you grow old because you stopped laughing."

Actually, it's not just in residential care I've seen this. I'm sure we all know of people who, after their other half died, or after a child of theirs died, or someone else close, all but stopped living themselves.

If anyone had reason to end his days in bitterness and self-pity it was the apostle Paul.

When he wrote his last letter (2 Timothy) he had been betrayed by a blacksmith called Alexander, and he was arrested and led away in such haste that he didn't even have time to gather any personal belongings. He wrote in wintertime and it was getting cold, so he asked Timothy (v13) to fetch him his heavy coat and his books as he awaited a date for sentencing.

But by now his trial was at an end; and though he had (v17) been spared the usual fate for Christians which was being ripped apart by wild beasts in the Coliseum, he was on death row. He was to be beheaded with one blow of a Roman sword which at least is instant and relatively painless, though not exactly a thing to relish.

There are 17 different people mentioned by name in chapter 4, some whom had let Paul down and deserted him. Only Luke the medic stayed by his side.

So – reasons to end your days in despondency; physical chill, loss of personal possessions, desertion of friends, loneliness and the prospect of death ever nearer.

How did Paul stay on top with all that to contend with?

"The time for my departure is near. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Now there is in store for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day..."

That's your challenge and mine. Fight the fight till it's over, run the race till it's finished and keep the faith.

When I was at school, I was pretty average academically and usually bottom of the class at maths, but I was a half decent cross-country runner. In fact, I used to run for my school in county races and I did OK. There were races that seemed hopeless, such was the gap between me and those far ahead – but it was always worth keeping going until the end. Most races, the pace setters spent all their energy early on and faded at the end. Just to keep running usually meant a top three finish for me.

The Christian life is compared several times in the Bible to a long-distance race. God not interested in winning though. It only matters that you complete the course, you run to the end and cross the line. Are you going to finish well?

I remember Billy Graham being interviewed on the Radio once and the presenter said, "Billy Graham, you've travelled the globe, you've preached to millions, you've seen countless conversions to Christ, you've appeared on Gallup's "Ten Most Admired People in the World" for thirty-two consecutive years, more than any other individual in the world, you've spoken personally with world statesmen, you've led prayers at the inauguration of several American Presidents... when you finally get to those pearly gates, what do you think will be your finest achievement?" And without a moment of hesitation, Graham said, "Just to have got there, just to have made it."

The Tuesday after next, Billy will turn 99. He's got Parkinson's. He's quite frail. But running the race is not about physical vigour. It's about spiritual resilience. He is still running the race, he's still going well. He's trusting in God and confident in the resurrection.

He has been a widower for 10 years now. His wife Ruth finished her race and is now with the Lord. The epitaph on her grave says "Ruth Bell Graham 1920-2007. End of construction. Thank you for your patience."

When in the next life, we meet our loved ones who have gone before us in faith, we will be like Jesus, and we shall see him as he is. And all the

old aches and pains will be over. And all our rough edges will be rounded off.

Paul and Timothy had a very close friendship, much like a father and son. Timothy, who was a sensitive soul, would no doubt have been devastated by Paul's death. It would have hit him like a freight train.

Did he get over it? How did it finish for Timothy? The Bible doesn't say but we can reconstruct from documents outside the Bible and ancient traditions. Piecing it all together it seems he did go to see Paul, as requested, before he died. He brought that winter coat and Paul's books. He stayed with Paul till the end, he watched his execution. Then he got into trouble for being associated with him and was himself imprisoned.

But Hebrews 13 says "our brother Timothy has been released" so unlike Paul he was reprieved. He was made bishop of Ephesus. When he was 80 timid Timothy was going strong. He bravely preached the gospel in the streets during a pagan festival. The crowd became angry, beat him, dragged him through the streets, and stoned him to death. He was true to the end.

I love to picture the scene at heaven's gate. Timothy arrives and asks if he can see Paul to let him know he finished the race, just like Paul charged him to do. And just as Paul's about to arrive, pushing through the crowds, Jesus appears in all his triumphant glory. "Timothy!" he says. "You made it! You finished the race. You kept the faith. Here's your crown!"

It's what he's going to say to you one day, as you keep fighting, keep running and complete the course. Fight the good fight. Finish the race. Keep the faith.

"Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles. And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith."