

## 25th Sunday of the Year (B)

### Who Is the Greatest?

Once every four years people throughout the world pause to watch, either in person or on television, what is arguably the world's greatest sporting event – the Olympic Games. The 2024 Olympics were held in Paris just last month. The 2028 Olympics will be in Los Angeles, and then in 2032 they will return to Australia when Brisbane will be the host city.

Certainly, there is much that is commendable in the Olympic spirit. It is good to witness humans striving for excellence and nations coming together for sport not war. The courage, dedication and sacrifice of the athletes are inspiring as are the moving examples of team spirit and so on. This is the case even more with the Paralympics, where athletes with sometimes severe disabilities perform amazing feats.

Of course, the Olympics have their shadow side as well. Individuals and nations can be overwhelmed by a desire to win at all costs, to be considered the greatest, just like Jesus' disciples in today's Gospel. The ambition they cannot satisfy can take over, as James warns in today's second reading. In the case of athletes, this can lead them to resort to performance enhancing drugs and other unfair means to win. For all of us, as individuals and nations, it can lead to conflicts and fighting as we seek to get our way through force.

Today's Scripture readings remind us that unbridled ambition, in the sporting arena or any other, can wreak havoc and cause great suffering. The wise person realises that most of all we should strive to be virtuous, compassionate, peacemakers and servants of each other. To excel in these qualities requires sacrifice on our part and a desire to be helpful. It also calls for humility to recognise, with the psalmist, that, it is the Lord who upholds our life.

You may remember the film, *Chariots of Fire*, that came out in 1981. It is based on the true story of two British athletes in the 1924 Paris Olympics – Eric Liddell, a devout Scottish Christian who ran for the glory of God, and Harold Abrahams, an English Jew who ran to overcome prejudice. Liddell, who could have won gold in the 100 metres sprint, refused to run when he learnt that the heats would be held on a Sunday, the Lord's Day. He put his devotion to the Lord above personal glory. Liddell's religious convictions in the face of national athletic pride, won him respect and made headlines around the world.

The most admirable athletes are those who recognise that they have been wonderfully blessed by God. Certainly, they have worked hard to develop their God-given talents, and they deserve praise for that. But essentially, they see themselves not as better than others but as specially blessed. They never lose the common touch. They remain humble. May their example inspire us all.

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