Hebrews 11:17 to 12:2
All Saints, Evensong, 061126

…let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us.

I was with a party of children the other day visiting St Woolos Cathedral. Many of them had never been in any kind of church before but I think even with about 200 seven to eleven year olds milling around they were still able to absorb some of the atmosphere of a building that has been used for prayer for many centuries.

The children enjoyed the practical activities such as sketching the font and they enjoyed climbing up into the pulpit. We had a particularly interesting discussion about the purpose of the lepers' window, until I realized that some of children were confusing leper with leopard! When we came to the lectern our guide told the children that the large bible was supported on the outstretched wings of an eagle because an eagle had brought the word of God down to earth. Now I had my doubts about that but I thought I'd better keep my scepticism to myself for the time being. Actually, I have not been able to discover the reason for the choice of an eagle other than that the eagle is traditionally regarded as a suitable creature to carry the word of God around the world.

Having had to write a lengthy essay on how the church got its bible I knew that it wasn't delivered by an eagle.

The earliest Christians used the only bible they had, the Jewish canon of scripture. Later, in around the second century the church began to take stock of the manuscripts that were circulating and eventually, by consensus, it was decided what was in and what was out.

The epistle to the Hebrews was one of those books that only just made it. For a start, it's not certain whether it is a letter or a sermon. Unlike all but one of the other 'epistles' there is no indication as to who was the author or for whom it was meant. The notion that it was meant for 'Hebrews' is largely based on the fact that it contains so many references to Old Testament scripture and Judaic traditions.

It was eventually included in the Christian canon of scripture largely because it was believed to have been written by St Paul. Yet for some time scholars have doubted that is the case, mainly because the quality of the Greek found in Hebrews is far superior to anything ever written by Paul and the theology is quite unlike anything in any of his other letters.

Yet what a travesty it would have been if Hebrews had been rejected, since I believe its message is as relevant to the church today as it was to those first century believers who were probably facing some kind of persecution and who were teetering on reverting to Judaism, which, as an

approved religion of the Roman Empire, offered a much safer option and a much easier ride. For while we may not by suffering persecution, we live in a world where there are many distractions, many temptations to put Jesus near the bottom of our priorities, or to ignore him altogether.

In the eleventh Chapter of Hebrews we have an exhaustive list of Old Testament heroes, and how they remained faithful to God, in very adverse circumstances. Abraham who was brought to the brink of sacrificing his only son; Joseph who almost met his death at the hands of his own brothers; Moses , who gave up a life of privilege to lead his own people out of slavery; Gideon, who brought down the walls of Jericho, and so on. The message for the recipients of Hebrews seems to be, if they could do it, then so can you.

In the first two verses of Chapter 12 the imagery changes to the kind of sporting event that would have been familiar to everyone in the Greco-Romano world –the games… and the spectators are all those Old Testament characters who have been presented to us in the previous chapter.

Therefore , since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses…
The word 'witness can have a number of meanings. It can mean one who gives a sworn testimony to a court, one who is present at the signing of a document; as a verb it can mean to 'profess one's religious faith', which is the main meaning here. But it can also mean a spectator.

Every athletic team with a winning tradition feels the pressure to live up to the standards of earlier, successful teams. The pressure is especially present when members of former teams attend the games as spectators, to evaluate the performance of the new boys, or girls. The writer of Hebrews is saying that every Christian lives within a historical tradition of faithfulness and every Christian is responsible to hand that tradition of faith and obedience on to another generation. We are who we are as Christians because of those Old Testament heroes, and because of Paul, and because Martin Luther and John Wesley and Mother Teresa and a host of other pastors, teachers and Christian models that have carried the faith through the centuries. Part of the responsibility of faithfulness is not only faithfulness to God but to the long living stream of faithful people who delivered the faith to us and expect us to pass it on to others.

And then we have … *Let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles,…*

The Games in ancient Greece were men only affairs –women were not allowed to watch and certainly not to take part. The athletes always participated naked so that they could run, throw or wrestle without any restriction holding them back. Today things

are a little different but a great deal of science has gone into designing clothing that gives the athlete or swimmer the greatest advantage. There are times when athletes in training will run with weighted back-packs or ankle weights to strengthen muscles and to build up stamina, but when it comes to the actual event weight is reduced to a minimum and the clothing is designed to allow ease of movement and to create a body profile as streamlined as possible. Swimmers even go the such lengths as shaving all of their body hair to eliminate drag as much as is possible.

The writer of Hebrews is saying, you've got to be like those athletes… you've got to strip away everything that's preventing you from making the complete commitment to the Lord Jesus. Those Christians to whom Hebrews was addressed might have been facing persecution of some kind, or they may have just been losing heart, but we have to deal with our own snares and pitfalls. What about the family that used to come to church but no longer does so, or does so less regularly… well, it's since our youngest started playing rugby on Sundays… we've got to transport him all over the county… Difficult for Mum or Dad to say, I'm sorry but as a family our place on a Sunday morning is in church. Perhaps we can find a club that plays its matches on Saturdays.

Well, we'd like to get more involved in the church but with both of us working Sunday's the only day we get to catch up on all the chores or to relax with the papers…

Well, I used to come to church but ever since they've been mucking about with the service it's not the same…

and do you really need God if you have a four bedroom house, two cars on the drive, a plasma screen T.V. and all of the other material so called benefits of our twenty first century affluent society?

… *Let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles,…and let us run with perseverance…*

When my son, Huw, was about eleven he was keen to enter the Cwmbran 7 mile Fun Run. With some concern for his safety –I had some apprehensions about a boy of his age road running alone, and to give him encouragement, I decided that I would enter as well and we would train together. Now he was a fit and lithe eleven year old; I was in my late thirties and, in those days, smoked about twenty roll ups every day. We started by doing a few laps around the boating lake and eventually, by about a week or so before the event, we were able to run from the house down to Caerleon, complete a circuit of the common, and run home, all without stopping. Huw, or course, would always arrive home about a quarter of an hour before I did, and in much better shape. He finished in good time for a boy of

his age, and I think I was about the 317th adult to cross the finishing line.

I'd love to able to end the story by saying how I got the running bug and went on to do marathons, but I didn't. I didn't enjoy running for one moment, and except for joining my daughter Emma on a three miler when she was in junior school, I never took part in any more races or fun runs. But I did learn a few things along the way. Most importantly, I learnt that I could achieve far more than I thought I was capable of, if I stuck at it, if I persevered.

When I was preparing this sermon I came across a quotation from Lynn Davies, (Lyn the Leap) who represented Great Britain in three Olympic Games and won the Gold Medal for the long jump in Tokyo in 1964. He said this:

"First of all competitors have talent, but it's not the most important thing - the important thing is that they have perseverance. They've had injuries, they've had setbacks, they've had illness, but it's a process of daily, weekly, monthly, yearly practice… That's what sport's about and that's what life is all about - motivation, ambition and enthusiasm. Talent is important, desire is important, commitment is important but it's perseverance that's the key."

Living in the Christian way, by which I mean, not being small minded, not bearing grudges, not always demanding your own way, not being set in your ways, not being envious, not easily taking offence, etc, etc., is not easy because we are all human and none of us is perfect, but with perseverance, we can, at least, achieve our Christian potential.

Many years ago, before our schools were burdened with the National Curriculum, Standard Assessments Tests, and Estyn inspections, the old Newport Authority approved the closure of all its primary schools on one afternoon in the summer term so that they could all take part in an annual athletics tournament held at Rodney Parade.

In those days I was a teacher at Alway Junior School and I remember one of our boys, who was a talented, but inexperienced, runner, asking the headmaster, "What have I got to do, sir?" The instructions he was given were simple: "When the gun fires, follow the boy in front." The instructions were very clear, very easy to understand, but not much help to a potential winner.

The author of Hebrews is saying, you have to live up to all those faithful believers who have gone before you, who have prepared the way for you, that cloud of witnesses,… he's saying you have to strip away all those distractions and temptations that will hold you back from making that total commitment to the Lord Jesus… and he's saying it's no good relying on following the runner in

front… This race we're in isn't a sprint, it's not a 100 metre dash, it's a marathon, it's a cross country, and there's always a chance that the runner in front has taken a wrong turning. We have to run the race marked out for us with perseverance, but the only way to make sure we stay on course is to keep our eyes fixed on Jesus. He is the perfecter of our faith because he has run the same earthly race that we are running. He started it in the same way as each one of us, as a tiny helpless child. When the time came for him to commence his ministry he forsook the comforts of home and family, he owned nothing but the clothes on his back, he threw off everything that hindered… He persevered to the point that he had to endure the cross for our redemption, and he's there at the finishing line saying, 'Come on, you can do it.'

The recipients of Hebrews needed encouragement. Perhaps they were facing persecution, perhaps they were disappointed that Jesus hadn't come back to them as they had expected. Perhaps many of them were beginning to wonder whether it was all worthwhile. Perhaps many of them were beginning to think about going back to the old religion, the old rituals of Judaism.

I am sure there are times when we all feel like that. The buzz that we felt at our confirmation isn't quite there anymore, the certainty that we felt when we first made that decision to give our lives entirely to the Lord Jesus… has faded… and perhaps the pressures of the work a day world have begun to overwhelm us…

The author of Hebrews had a message of encouragement for those early wavering Christians, whoever and wherever they were, and it is a message for us: what you have is infinitely better than anything that you have ever had before; hold fast to your faith… and you will attain the prize.