

13th July, 2014.

Reading: Matthew 13: 1 – 9, 18 – 23

Sermon: Our hearts must be in it.

My first thought today concerns the Queen's Baton. There's a degree of excitement in the town with the passing through of the Queen's Baton at lunchtime today on its way to Inveraray and then Dunoon. A number of people will carry it and will pass it on to someone else. Willie Young will start off with it at the swimming pool. Catherine from the Dochas Centre will carry it. Alex and Mary McCuaig's grandson will also carry it and pass it on to the next person in line.

As I thought about this, what struck me was that it wouldn't get very far if no one was prepared to do that. For today to be a success, those who have made a commitment to closing the roads, to organising the event, to providing the entertainment, to those carrying the baton itself, all need to turn up and take some kind of pride in what they are doing.

The second thing which struck me was that there have been months of preparation for the coming of the baton and years of preparation for the coming of the Games, not to mention the years of training which have been put in by the competitors. Without the efforts of many people, the Games just wouldn't happen.

To produce good results the competitors train for hours, and not just at their sport, but to improve their level of fitness. I would be on a hiding to nothing. I might be full of good intentions but I would lack the commitment needed because at the end of the day, my heart just wouldn't be in it. I wouldn't be hungry enough for success.

I saw a female boxer on television the other night who won a Gold Medal at the Olympic Games and her trainer had her out with an axe chopping huge logs to increase her body strength. It was incredibly hard work but what struck me was that there is so much in the way of training goes on behind the scenes, which those of us who are less sporty wouldn't even think about being part of the training regime.

The competitors with their trainers put in hours of work each day and their level of commitment is what produces results. It happens because they are hungry for success. They are out to fulfil their hearts desire and they will work through the pain barrier to achieve their goals. Nothing will get in the way.

However, it's not just a case of training or working through the pain barrier. The competitors reach the top of their sport because they listen to their trainer. They take the advice of their trainer and then they put into practice what they have learned and they get better at what they do.

Along the way, there will have been many who will have fallen by the wayside who were full of good intentions but who just wouldn't commit the time and effort needed. They'll have got fed up with the early morning rise or the fact that their friends are out enjoying themselves at the weekends while they are undergoing a punishing regime. Life will have got in the way and they will have discovered that their heart was just not in it. They weren't hungry enough for success. They didn't want it badly enough.

When we watched Djokovic and Federer last Sunday afternoon, there were two men who wanted to win and who put their heart and soul into the game. When Federer was down 2/3 – 5 and Djokovic was serving for the match, I would just have given up and admitted defeat but Federer came back and won something like the next five games in a row making it two sets all. Neither was prepared to throw in the towel. They both wanted to win. They had put in the hours of training. They were committed and they were prepared to put in the effort when it mattered most, which made it an amazing game to watch.

Where sport is concerned, when your heart is in it, you will listen to your trainer, you will make the commitment, you will put in the work and you will progress. For most of them, the next stage is passing on to others all that they have learned when they themselves become trainers.

When I read the opening verses of Matthew 13, it reminded me of how I felt one day at Messy Church. We were doing the story of Noah and I had one of those children's books with flaps which you lift and underneath were the various animals which were going into the ark.

I was surrounded by little children and one in particular who was hanging on to my book, pointing at all the animals and chatting away to me, so desperate was he to see what was under the flaps and so excited was he that he had to tell me everything he saw.

I was also hanging onto the book and yanking it from one side of me to the other so that I could continue with the story. It was hilarious but I felt a bit like Jesus must have felt as the crowds gathered round him on the shore. To function, he needed space and so he got into the boat. I had no boat but still needed space. I had no idea where I was

in the story that day because the children were crowding me to such an extent that I was losing the plot. The competitors at the Games needed to make space for themselves so that they could train and focus on the matter in hand.

As I said a moment ago, Jesus also needed space to do what he was trying to do and to learn anything from him, the crowds had to listen to him. Jesus, if you like, was their trainer.

There is no doubt that he put the hours in but how productive were his efforts? At the end of the day, it's not just about listening. It's about acting on what we hear. The parable of the sower, I think, makes that clear.

People always flocked to see Jesus perform miracles. The entertainment value was good but Jesus wasn't there simply to entertain or to perform miracles. He had a message which he desperately wanted to get across to the people.

What's interesting in the story is that the results were not dependent on the seed or the technique used in sowing it. What brought results was the quality of the soil in which it landed. The point Jesus was making was that the seed he plants through his message only bears fruit when the heart is receptive and when people are willing to respond and commit to growth, like the competitors at the Games.

On the Church website, David Oakley, who is the British Director of Ambassadors Football said that as part of the united Christians 'More Than Gold' Campaign, the seeds of faith would be distribute in a number of ways, for example, through holiday Bible Clubs, through the hospitality that is being offered, through Big Screen Events, through literature distribution, chaplaincy, community festivals, sports' quizzes and so on but the key to the success of that campaign is the receptivity of the hearer's heart.

Hard soil, a hard heart, will not bear much fruit. The message can be snatched away by an intellectual response where the hearer cannot grasp faith because he or she is so stuck in their head, that they have to rationalise faith or explain faith. The heart is where faith grows. Faith grows in the soft, life-giving soil of the heart, not in a hard head where faith cannot plant roots.

Equally, the message will have no impact in the equivalent of rocky soil which is a heart that responds but cannot commit. The roots find nothing to ground themselves in and so the message which was planted wilts and dies. That's on a par with the potential athlete who gets distracted by the world around and fails to commit to training, fails

to put in the hours, lacks a determination to win. There is no depth of commitment.

Finally, there is the thorny soil where all the cares and worries of the world crowd in and prevent growth. It wasn't for nothing that Jesus told us to come to him when we were heavy laden and he would give us rest. We cannot grow and bear fruit if the life is being squeezed out of us.

We talk about a thorn in the flesh. Thorns cause pain and infection. Wrong relationships, constant criticism, constant complaints, a lack of gratitude, hurts, all of those things and much more besides, fester away and destroy us and not only that, they destroy faith.

Faith will grow when hearts are ready to receive the message. Faith will grow in hearts which clear out the rocks and the thorns and the weeds, the things which crowd our lives and which fester away within us causing us to lose our focus and to give up our commitment.

Faith needs space to grow but it needs a commitment from us to listen to our trainer, to listen to God, to take His advice, to follow the path along which He guides us and to then bear fruit. However, as I am discovering, fruit which is just left hanging on plants rots. It needs to be used. The fruit of faith needs to be used too. It needs to be shared, passed on like the baton so that our efforts have a chance of success, a chance of producing more fruit, more people to train for the future.

But it begins with us. It is not the fault of the seed or of the sower if we get a poor yield. It all comes down to how ready hearts are to receive the message and to grow and to make a commitment to our faith and to our God. Pray that our hearts will reflect the enthusiasm of that young child who was eager to discover more and to share it.