

On Marathon Running

Michael Bochenski

Minister of Rugby Baptist Church, Warwickshire

The race that most impresses me at the Olympics is the marathon, that long-distance running event with an official distance of 42.195 kilometres (or 26 miles, 385 yards). The event has a long history. It was instituted in commemoration of the fabled run of a Greek soldier Pheidippides, as a messenger from the Battle of Marathon in 490BC, to Athens. The statistics for the marathon race are deeply impressive. At the 2008 Summer Olympics, a new Olympic men's record (2:06:32) was set by Samuel Kamau Wanjiru of Kenya. The Olympic women's record (2:23:14) was set at the 2000 Summer Olympics by Naoko Takahashi of Japan. Some have run the marathon even faster, however - Haile Gebrselassie of Ethiopia ran it in 2:03:59 in Berlin in September 2008 and Britain's own Paula Radcliffe still holds the best women's record for the event - 2:15:25 in London in April 2003.

The training necessary for a marathon race is impressive. Recreational runners commonly try to reach a maximum of about 20 miles in their longest weekly run and a total of about 40 miles a week when training for a marathon race. Elite marathon runners, however, will have weekly mileages of over 100 miles! ¹²¹

My favourite marathon story goes back to the 1968 Mexico Olympics and a remarkable Olympic athlete, John Akhwari from Tanzania. He finished the 1968 men's marathon race last, an hour or so behind the winner. He had fallen during the race and his badly injured leg was sore and bleeding. Nonetheless, he finished the race. A brazen television interviewer asked him: "Why did you bother to carry on, with such a serious injury and no hope of coming anything but last?" John Akhwari replied: "My country did not send me 5000 miles to Mexico to start a race; they sent me 5000 miles to finish it!" ¹²²

There is a message for us in Christian ministry here, whether the race is young for us, or we are, perhaps, nearing the final stages.

¹²¹ <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Marathon>. Accessed 17 January 2011

¹²² http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_Stephen_Akhwari Accessed 17 January 2011

Our call from the Lord Jesus as ministers is to aim always to be his followers and to finish the race, not just begin it or even get over halfway! Having recently celebrated the Pearl Anniversary (30 years) of my ordination as a Baptist Minister, the analogy of the marathon strikes me then as a powerful one for the work of ministry. For example, it speaks of the need to stay the course; the need for ongoing training; the importance of pacing yourself, and of making sure you get enough intake to sustain you throughout the race; learning to keep reserves back for the final stages.

One of the earliest pieces of advice I was given as I began my ministry marathon was this: know your Bible, know yourself and - above all - know your God. I have tried to keep that advice. Know your Bible and therefore enjoy biblical studies. Know yourself - and therefore practise theological reflection. Know your God - and therefore commit yourself to the lifelong study and practice of theology.

Know your Bible - biblical studies

My College Principal was Dr Barrie White, a church historian blessed with a rapier-like wit and a dry sense of humour. He was a life-long mentor to many. His keynote address at the 1980 Mainstream Conference “Opening our Doors to God”¹²³ helped to shape the charismatic-evangelical convergences of the 1980s.¹²⁴ During my first few days in College he shared with us words that have stayed with me for over three decades: “The Word of God is the Word of God. But the Word of God may not be what you think it is now!”. For an evangelical, first nurtured in a narrow King James Version-only tradition, this was a challenge to explore, to think and above all to open my doors to God and His Word. Reading, studying, living, preaching and teaching the Bible has been my life’s calling.

Chrysostom wrote: “It is a great thing this reading of the Scriptures! For it is not possible ever to exhaust the mind of the Scriptures. It is a well that has no bottom”.

Francis of Assisi, early in his life, found himself in an enemy prison after a battle had gone horribly wrong. There a cellmate

¹²³ B.R.White, ‘Opening our Doors to God’ (Mainstream 1980).

¹²⁴ I.M.Randall, *The English Baptists of the 20th Century* (Didcot: The Baptist Historical Society, 2005).

had a copy of the Bible hidden within his cell. He hid it in Francis' bandages before they took him away to be executed. Days passed before Francis realized what the old man had put deep within his bandages, but when he found it, he began to read it ferociously, memorizing the scriptures that contained the hope that would keep him alive in that living hell. As he recovered from his wounds, the words of the Bible became embedded in his mind and spirit and he came to know them by heart. With them he helped to change the face of the Mediaeval Church.

Martin Luther wrote: "The Bible is alive, it speaks to me; it has feet, it runs after me; it has hands, it lays hold on me...The Bible is the true Lord and Master of all writings and doctrines on earth". John Wesley's devotion to Scripture was also legendary: "I expect you to show me plain Scripture for your assertion - otherwise I dare not receive it; because I am not convinced that you are wiser than God".

Consider, too, Martin Niemöller in Dachau Concentration Camp: "The Word of God was simply everything to me - comfort and strength and guidance and hope, master of my days and companion of my nights, the Bread which kept me from starvation and the Water of Life which refreshed my soul".

The New International Version (NIV) has been my preferred teaching and preaching Bible since I bought my first copy in Blackwells, Oxford, on the day it was first published in Britain. More recently, I have come to enjoy and respect, in my devotional reading, Eugene Peterson's translation of the entire Old and New Testaments: *The Message*. Writing of this process, Peterson wrote: "I am very conscious that I am in a vast company of translators - teachers in class-rooms, pastors in pulpits, parents around the supper table, writers in languages all over the world, baptized Christians in workplaces and social gatherings past imagining - all of us at this same work, collaborators in translating the word of God, reading and then living this text, eating the book, and then getting these Scriptures into whatever language is heard and spoken on the street on which we live." ¹²⁵

¹²⁵ E. H. Peterson, *Eat this Book: A Conversation in the Art of Spiritual Reading* (Hodder and Stoughton, London 2006), 176.

During my training at Regent's Park College, Oxford, in the late 1970s, I recall the sense of having been rumbled at last: "They are paying me to study the psalms" (!) went through my excited mind. "Not much!" was the next thought - but that is *not* the point! That sense of thrill and wonder has never left me - "They are paying me to study, live, preach and teach God's Word" remains a delightful thought.

Know yourself - Theological Reflection

My first mentor was Bruce Keeble, pastoral tutor at Regent's. Bruce taught me to see how both a minister's strengths and weaknesses would be reproduced in the life of a church and to do what I can to compensate for my weaknesses by delegating and using other people to cover them. My ministerial strengths have been a commitment to hard work and an ability to balance administrative, pastoral and teaching gifts in such a way as to keep many irons in several fires (usually) without them going out.

In my Cowley pastorate, I benefitted from a sentence in an Anthony Trollope novel: "A man's skin may be toughened like a blacksmith's arms." Learning to toughen up under criticism and to both learn from it, but also sometimes challenge it, became part of my ministerial lifestyle from that time.

In Blackburn, where Graham Ashworth became both my friend and mentor, I was taught to recognise that leadership from the front is fine until you look back and see that few if any have followed you all the way. Leadership from the middle and sometimes front became my preferred pattern thereafter.

In St Albans, where David Staple proved a wise and always helpfully critical guide, I had to learn about coping with rejection and stress at various levels, especially as "The Toronto Blessing" worked its way through my congregation. Some at that time concluded that the church, much of its leadership and I personally were all no longer blessed by God. Mercifully, that proved to be a minority report, but how hard it was to live and minister through.

In Poland, a former President of the Baptist Union there, Konstanty Wiazowski, was my friend, translator and guide. From him I learned (again) that complaining was in the end no substitute for doggedness and that refusing to take 'No' for an

answer can sometimes be the only way to move an institution on and to help prepare it for future challenges.

I could go on about weaknesses and lessons learned over my marathon to date. I suspect this will be part of what is meant by facing “the judgment seat of Christ” (2 Cor 5.10) after my race ends. John Weaver’s writings on theological reflection have long been helpful to me ¹²⁶ Theological reflection is the bringing together of God and his Word, my own character and experiences, and a contemporary issue or situation or problem in a creative process of thought, decision and action. This is what the theologians of liberation, to whom I have devoted much of my academic research and writing over these thirty years, call *praxis*. Here is a helpful summary of what it means in practice: “Theological reflection is the discipline of exploring individual and corporate experience in conversation with the wisdom of a religious heritage. The conversation is a genuine dialogue that seeks to hear from our own beliefs, actions, and perspectives, as well as those of the tradition. It respects the integrity of both. Theological reflection therefore may confirm, challenge, clarify, and expand how we understand our own experience and how we understand the religious tradition. The outcome is new truth and meaning for living.” ¹²⁷

Know your God - Theology

The BBC nature documentary, *The Blue Planet*, was an epic, eight-part series that took five years to complete. It is breathtaking, inspiring and thrilling. Spectacular camera work captures images of a fascinating world rarely seen by human eyes - let alone caught on camera. This documentary series is a testimony to the fact that, although oceans cover two-thirds of the Earth, we know so little about them. *God the Three in One and One in Three* is, I would like to suggest, like *The Blue Planet*. Here, too, is an Ocean vast and only ever partially explored by us all. Theology is a journey of discovery into the Trinity. Here we see only through a mirror and dimly. It will take us all of this world and the next to study and worship the Triune God. But there is surely no more

¹²⁶ See for example his *Outside-In: Theological Reflections on Life* (Regent’s Park College and Smyth & Helwys, 2006).

¹²⁷ Patricia O’Connell Killen & John de Beer, *The Art of Theological Reflection* (Crossroads, New York 1994), viii

important object of study than this? Theology means quite simply that: the study of God.

I used to enjoy reminding God's people in Poland that every Christian is a theologian! That is to say - all of us are called to study God, learning how to love and know and serve him better day by day. But there are those the Lord has called into some of the ocean depths, those who are Theology's deep-sea explorers, who have been privileged to study theology for a lifetime and longer. I am reminded of the story of the little girl who was deep in concentration over a drawing she was scribbling on some paper. Her mother asked her what she was drawing and received the curt reply, "God." Her mother protested, "But no one knows what God looks like!" The little girl replied, "They will now!" What a helpful attitude with which to study theology. When I've finished the marathon more people will know - please God - what He is like!

Finally, I pay tribute to the writings of Eugene Peterson, who has been guide and companion to my marathon running in recent years. This followed a sabbatical largely spent studying and reading his many books, including *The Message*, cover to cover. Peterson's call has been for continuity and longevity in local church Christian ministry. My practice, since ordination, has been to keep two books on the go at any one time - a book on any aspect of Christianity, and a novel, play or book of poetry. Peterson calls this spiritual reading - *lectio divina*. My ministry, preaching and life have been all the richer for this discipline. Peterson's books are full of the fruit of his own spiritual reading - Joyce, Dickens, Dostoevsky and Manley-Hopkins appear alongside Bonhoeffer, von Hügel, Charles Williams, C S Lewis and John Henry Newman. I cannot emulate Peterson's prolific use of all he has read, but we ministers can surely learn from it. We can learn too from the scale and scope of Peterson's understanding of Christianity. He is someone who has become used to finding the Lord and, in him, spiritual truth in the whole of life. In his father's butchers shop; in country walks across Montana; in the love of his wife or grandchildren; in a football game or a pastoral encounter; in the muddled discipleship of a typical congregation, in a student's question or a cataclysmic event. Peterson has learned to study God well. May we be good theologians too!

Know your Bible, know yourself, know your God, as the marathon race of ministry unfolds. The words of one of Britain's best known

prayers - by Francis Drake - capture all of this and so much more: "O Lord God, when Thou givest to Thy servants to endeavour any great matter, grant us also to know that it is not the beginning, but the continuing of the same through the end, until it be thoroughly finished, which yieldeth true glory, through Him who for the finishing of Thy work laid down His life, our Redeemer Jesus Christ". Amen.

The Giant Advent Calendar

Leesa Barton

Associate Minister of Central Baptist Church, Chelmsford

As a town centre church, many people walk past our building every day. Most people are on their way to or from work, or school, or to the shops, and take very little notice of the building. Some don't even realise that they are walking past a church.

At Christmas we wanted to make an impact on those who walked past. We wanted to make them aware that the church was not only there, but was a vibrant place, full of activity. And we wanted them to think about the message of Christmas, and to consider what that message means today.

Inspired by the Beach Hut Advent Calendar in Brighton, we decided to create a Giant Advent Calendar in the front doorway of the church. This front door is a large grand entrance, but is rarely used to enter the building as people normally enter through a side door. A false wall was built from wood to create a large, contained display area, allowing the main door to be opened at the front of the display, without causing a draft through the rest of the building. We encouraged church groups, families, friends, and local organisations to take responsibility for a day, and suggested a theme to focus the displays. Our theme this year was Christmas carols, and we encouraged those creating the displays to try and think of one aspect of the carol to illustrate, and if possible, to put a contemporary thought to it.

Each day the door would be opened at a different time (as advertised by a board outside) and remained open for a couple of