

## 69 Marathons

This weekend sees the running of the London Marathon, one of the largest and oldest of the "peoples' marathons" that are now held in many cities around the world.

A marathon has always been a Mount Everest of a challenge. The individual runner is faced with months of preparation beforehand - diet, fitness, kit, shoes, training - and above all, with the need for a steady resolve to "see this through", to cope with it come what may, to achieve, and finally to succeed. The day itself dawns - the travelling and preparing, the weather, the last-minute routines, the gathering at the line amongst hundreds of others, and then, at long last, the "off".

Each individual in that jostling mass of runners is unique, with their own story, their own reasons for being there, their own struggles, their own good causes they are supporting, their own hopes and fears, their own strengths and weaknesses.

As the race proceeds, the runners gradually spread out, settling down for the long haul. Some remain chatting throughout in cheerful groups of friends; some, in their joke-costumes, raise a laugh and applause as they pass by; while others, even when in a crowd of runners, end up quite alone, plodding bravely along, hardly noticed.

At some point in the runner's mind, the "mental hump" is reached and struggled through and passed. After that, whatever the pain and the remaining miles, there is that settled certainty that getting to the Finish is going to happen.

And eventually it does happen: there before them is that wonderful finishing line with all that it means - exhaustion, elation, achievement, victory.

This weekend we remember another rather different marathon too. The crowds lined the track down the Mount of Olives, across the Kidron brook, and up into Jerusalem. There were no runners to watch in this marathon - just a young man riding a donkey, surrounded by his disciples.

We read right back in Luke 9.51 that Jesus "steadfastly set his face to go to Jerusalem". For Him, the months of preparation were not so much physical as spiritual. From the Scriptures, He already knew much of what awaited Him when the authorities would have finally got their hands on Him. He had many quiet hours alone with His Father, contemplating what lay ahead - the prospect of appalling suffering, followed by unspeakable joy. Above all, at last, would come the victory so sought by His Father, which Jesus alone could achieve, for His Father, and for us.

So Jesus' 80-mile, many-weeks, walking-paced marathon slowly unfolded. Day by day, step by step, inner struggle by inner struggle, He drew nearer to Jerusalem. He knew His Zechariah 9.9 as well as anyone - "Behold, thy King cometh unto thee ... lowly, and riding upon an ass ....".

And on that bright morning, with those great city walls stretched out along the ridge above Him, there He was. Here was a calm, clear statement, to all and sundry, that Messiah the King was come. Loud applause, cheers, coats in the road, branches in the air - it all looked just so good!

But in the midst of the joy Jesus was only too aware that this lonely spiritual marathon which the Father was asking of Him still had many miles to run. Jesus reached His own "mental hump" in Gethsemane, when everything in His Being was shrieking to give up, to crawl away, to forget the whole thing. Those hours of inner agony in the garden He managed to overcome, thanks be to God. From then on, He knew He was going make it to the Finish, despite the awful horrors of the hours ahead.

Our own lives of discipleship are tiny marathons in their way. We are no strangers to effort, resolve, steadfastness and keeping going when we have had enough! There are times of laughter and fellowship and enthusiasm, when life is good, the way we want it to be and feel it should be. Then, "sure as eggs", there are the other times - perhaps sorrow, pain, loneliness, a sense of abandonment, of being unnoticed.

Such ups and downs along the Way are normal. As we think of those runners in the London Marathon, or of the Lord Jesus in His own marathon, we cope with

our own "mental humps", seeking with God's help to "press on toward the mark for the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus" (Philippians 3.14).

The crowds may cheer or jeer - for that is what crowds do - but we keep steadily on, following the One, the only One, who "has the words of eternal life" (John 6.68).

Yes, it's a marathon, and yes, by God's grace, it's worth it!

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