



CATHOLIC BISHOPS' CONFERENCE

Homily: Paralympics Thanksgiving Mass

Archbishop Peter Smith

8 SEPTEMBER 2012, ST GEORGE'S CATHEDRAL, SOUTHWARK

Today we celebrate the feast of the Birthday of the Blessed Virgin Mary, and give thanks to God for the extraordinary success of the Paralympics in the heart of our capital city. The competitors have given us a truly inspiring example of hard work, or in their own words “hard graft”, dedication and commitment in their training and in the various events they took part in over the past two weeks. Their joy, enthusiasm and obvious happiness in competing in the games was matched by the 80,000 spectators who came to watch and support them, as it was too by the thousands of volunteers who made such an impression on visitors by their cheerfulness, kindness and competence in fulfilling their duties as stewards. The games radiated generosity, goodness and achievement - a vision of a the values and attitudes which can build up and renew society at large, a society in which everybody is welcome, everybody is respected whatever their abilities or disabilities, and everybody has a real hope of living a more fulfilled life.

So how might we relate the experience of the Paralympics to today's feast of the Birthday of Our Blessed Lady, and how can we learn from both? I'm told that in the Byzantine age, the New Year began in September, so as one commentator has put it, “there may be a hint of new beginnings in locating the feast of Mary's birth at the beginning of the second week of this month.” In celebrating today's feast, we are reminded that Mary's birth brought with it the dawn of new hope and the promise of salvation to the whole world. In his letter to the Romans, St. Paul says, “that by turning everything to their good, God co-operates with all those who love him”, because all those God calls are “intended to become true images of his Son.”

Our human dignity is rooted in that truth, whether we recognise it or not. And the profound consequence is that all human life is sacred from its first beginning at conception until its natural end, and we are all equal in dignity, irrespective of race, colour or creed. Beyond that fundamental equality of dignity, each one of us is unique in terms of size, shape, temperament, abilities and limitations whether physical, mental or emotional. We need to recognise both the uniqueness, and the differences which we all have, and so discover the particular gifts and talents God has given to each of us. Then we can learn to use them, not solely for our own benefit, but for the benefit of others, contributing to their good and the common good of society. God calls us to develop our potential for living life to the full; he wants all of us, whatever our condition, to celebrate with deep joy our own achievements and those of others, whilst at the same time accepting that we all have limitations of one kind or another and consequently we are not perfect. We all need to learn to overcome as best we can and with the help and support of others, the particular limitations and difficulties we all have to face one way or another.

One of the greatest gifts God gave to Our Blessed Lady was the gift of total trust in God and in his providence which enabled her to fulfil her unique role in becoming the Mother of God and Mother of the Church. As Pope John Paul II reminded us (in his Encyclical Letter, *Evangelium Vitae*), it was Mary, the Virgin Mother whose “consent at the Annunciation and her motherhood stand at the very beginning of the mystery of life which Christ came to bestow on humanity.” She, he said, is the incomparable model of how life should be welcomed, respected and cared for. But like her son and the Church, Mary too had to live her motherhood amid suffering. In the words of Simeon at the Presentation in the Temple, “You see this child: he is destined for the fall and for the rising of many in Israel, destined to be a sign that is rejected - and a sword will pierce your own soul too .”

The London Olympics and Paralympics set out to “inspire a generation”. The dedication and commitment to excellence by the competitors and indeed all those involved in setting up and seeing through the games have given us a wonderful and moving example of what is called in this day and age, “community cohesion” - people working together generously and happily to create a joyful, welcoming and lively community within and around the games. In other words, from a Christian point of view, a living out of the second commandment, “Love your neighbour as yourself.”

We are called to do the same in our own lives and in our journey of faith: and to do so with generosity, confidence, courage, perseverance, and, in the words of many of the competitors, “hard graft”! God knows we are weak and fragile creatures, too ready to give up, turn in on ourselves and be overwhelmed by self-pity. That’s why we need the help and intercession of Mary, our Mother. She was not, in human terms, privileged. She wasn’t powerful, wealthy, or a celebrity. She was a simple straightforward young girl born into an ordinary family. Yet it was she who God chose and called to fulfil her hidden potential and to become the mother of his Son. She gave an unconditional ‘yes’ to that call, and she renewed that ‘yes’ every day of her life, whether she was struggling to find a room to give birth to her son, or bearing the suffering of exile so soon after he was born, distressed and anxious when Jesus went missing for a few days, and having to watch the growing rejection of her son by the religious authorities and people, a rejection which came to its completion in his crucifixion and death on the Cross.

Mary is for us one of the greatest examples of hope, serenity and joy in the midst of suffering. She had an unwavering faith and trust in the word of the Lord: “You are precious in my sight and I love you.” That’s what God says to each and every one of us: “You are precious in my sight and I love you: I love you just as you are, with your strengths and weaknesses, with your abilities and disabilities. I don’t turn away from anyone. I want you all to flourish and grow and come to share in the fullness of life and love in my heavenly kingdom.”

Looking at and listening to the wonderful choir of youngsters from Dockhead we have been blessed to have with us this morning, and who thrilled everyone at the opening ceremony a few weeks ago, I’m asking myself, what lasting legacy are we going to build with them and for them? It’s a question which presents a challenge to all of us: to our families, our schools and colleges, our parish communities, our neighbourhoods and wider society. Inspired by the games, I hope it will be a society in which every person will be held in respect and in which the human dignity of every person will be honoured and protected; a society in which everyone will be helped to flourish and achieve their full potential and become truly “images of the living God”; a society characterised by the living out of the second commandment: “Love your neighbour as yourself.”