

Christian life may be compared to marathon race. That means 42 kilometers of running, breathing, sweating, hopefully not stumbling. Dehydration a danger to threaten the runners, shortage of breath, bones aching, sour muscles will hurt, joints may grate and crackle. Here in South Africa, they even top the marathon races that are run around the world, like the New York marathon, or the Berlin marathon, by the Durban-Pietermaritzburg race called “The Comrades” – 90 kilometers either up the hills from the coast in Durban, or going down the same stretch from Pietermaritzburg to the sea. Christoph Weber, a brother to our Rector has run this race twice, as far as I know. Not to mention the triathletes with their four kilometers of swimming, 180 kilometers of cycling, and another marathon - 42 kilometers - of running. It takes courage, it takes discipline, it takes a whole lot of training, it takes a strict diet, too, I guess, plus appropriate equipment, to get prepared for such a race, and to successfully finish it.

And while training, and even while running, you have to fight down quite a lot of near-by temptations: To stay in bed instead of getting up and doing your daily measure of kilometers; to just stop before you have reached the limit of running hours you had set up for today; to give in to the seduction of laziness; to fall for a two or three days break in exercise, to simply give up for the sake of the exhaustion you feel in your bones, in your muscles, and in your lungs, in soul mind and soul, threatened to simply break down, tempted to just lie down where you are, sighing: I can do no more. Perseverance is what is needed!

This seems to be the situation of the Christian congregation the epistle to the Hebrews is addressed to. Because they are Christians, they suffer. They suffer from being mocked, they suffer from being set aside by the fellow-citizens; they suffer from persecution, but as the apostle does know, “not to the point of shedding your blood”. Others have, like the 21 Coptic Christians who were beheaded by the terror militia “IS” a week ago in Libya, not to mention hundreds and thousands of our fellow Christians in Africa who are under constant threat of being bombed, killed, murdered, taken hostage, kidnapped, like in Nigeria and elsewhere. Nevertheless it is hardships those first to second generation Christians have to endure, no doubt about that. The apostle is ultimately clear in his statement. There is no denying, no white-washing, no dissimulation: His addressees are going through hard times because of their Christian faith. And understandably, they are getting tired of being treated unkindly; they are losing heart; they are tempted to find an easy way out.

That is why the apostle seeks to comfort them, to exhort them, and to encourage them, not to give in, not to give up. And he does so by presenting to them “Jesus the author and perfecter of our faith”. At first hearing we might imagine that Jesus were presented to us as an example only. Look at Him – He did not give in nor did He give up; Jesus is the one to accomplish what He began, no matter how hard it was for Him to endure. He, our hero, did not even shy away from the cross on Calvary, rather he denied all worldly joy, and went to death willingly. Consequently He was rewarded to sit “down at the right hand of the throne of god” (v. 2). And now, my fellow-Christian go ahead, like He did! Just fix your eyes on Him”,

and carry on! It may be a way of motivating sportsperson by setting before their eyes a hero, be it a world cup winner, a boxing champion or a formula 1 winner, or a world class tennis player. Striving for being like them may set free energies, in order to reach that very goal of perfection, of world class performance as well.

But the apostle, if we read thoroughly, does not make use of this kind of motivation by outstanding example. Instead he identifies Jesus as the “author and perfecter of our faith”. That is to say, it is not us to start, or to have started the race of faith. Rather it is Jesus Who marked and made the beginning of our faith. It is Jesus Who has originated faith in us, has made it come into existence. He has created faith in our hearts so we now believe in Him. And He not only gave the starting signal, but in our baptism, He bestowed upon us His power to run the race of faith successfully. For we were given the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of life, a life-giving, and life-sustaining power coming from God empowering us.

Surely, looking at the strife that it can mean to be a Christian, such support and help is ultimately necessary. We are by no means exempt from dire straits, quite the opposite! Being brothers and sisters of Christ, we are deemed to share His fate. “A servant is not above his master,” as Jesus puts it Himself (Mt 10:24). The apostle links this phenomenon of our christiformity, our likeness to Christ, or our formation into Christ, to the fact that we are all children of God. We still need to be rebuked, we still need to be disciplined, and whenever we fall from the walk of life that is appropriate for sisters and brothers of Jesus Christ and God’s beloved children, we even need punishment. That is why we are here this morning, in order to confess our wrongdoings to our heavenly Father, and to ask Him for His mercy, benevolence, and acceptance. It is necessary to throw off things that impede us from running a race of Christian faith; it is most helpful, at the same time, to get rid of those hindrances we carry around within ourselves, that block us off from restarting. Confession and absolution are, so to speak, resting areas, in the long-term race that we are running. Here, we can lay down the burdens that hinder us from striving for the goal, here we are invited and allowed to throw off anything that might press us to the ground, so we might not be able to get started again.

Therefore, while we are on our way to the goal that is set before us, Jesus in the meanwhile supports us by the Holy Spirit, He strengthens us by His word of forgiveness, He encourages us by a word of comfort, He nourishes us with His true body and blood, life giving gifts as well, and moreover, medicine of immortality. At the same time, as the “perfecter of our faith”, Jesus grants us perseverance when our strength is fading, He is standing at the finish line, keeps drawing us towards Himself. Yet in between He is accompanying us along the race course, time and again ensuring us: I am with you, I am at your side, I have started all this with you and within you, and I am sending you tailwinds, and indeed, I am carrying you. This all happens when you hear and believe His word: Your sins are forgiven!” And finally, Jesus is waiting for you to cross the finish line. There He will embrace us, saying: “My beloved brothers and sisters who finally made it, all of you winners, and champions with Me.”

Amen