

Matins: 26th October 2015

Theme: Spiritual warfare & Watchword: "Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good." (Rom 12:21 NIV) Sermon on 1 Corinthians 9:24-27¹ Hymn 657

Dear friends of our Lord IX: Did you know St. Paul was a boxer? Someone like Muhammed Ali alias Cassius Marcellus Clay, Jr, or Maximillian Adolph Otto Siegfried "Max" Schmeling who beat up Joe Louis or our own Boksburg Bomber: Gerhardus Christian Coetzee – Gerrie was sy naam! en nie "Seer handtjies" as his teaser Kallie Knoetze called him – who beat Leon Spinks in the glittering palaces of Monte Carlo and then Michael Dokes². Or take Elijah 'Tap Tap' Makhatini – the favourite of my Zuluteacher at UP even today. There are lots more: Jacob Matlala, Dingaane Thobela, Cassius Baloyi, Thulani Malinga to mention but a few. Well, ok St. Paul was not quite like that, but he does talk about boxing.

Nelson Mandela was a real fighter. You'd expect that, but did you know Bishop Tswaedi and his student colleague and friend Morei threw no weak punches either? I remember as a school boy I saw them train lifting weights with those big iron rods with paint-tins filled with concrete at the ends. I could barely lift them 10 inches off the ground, whilst these men pressed 50-80-100 with ease. No whimps, no softies, but real men these future pastors and the long-term bishop of our church! St. Paul was not quite like that and I can't picture our Lord Jesus as a boxer either.

Still, there's lots of sports today. Soccer is one, Rugby another. The biggest might still be the Olympics challenging the worlds finest sportsmen and women across the globe. Runners from Kenya & Ethiopia & Namibia, from the W. Indies, Barbados and US. Wrestlers from the Ukraine, Greece & Russia and the German stars in Shotput, Discus & Javelin. These Olympic disciplines go right back to the days of St. Paul. Olympic games were a favourite sporting event like those other games in Pythia and Isthmia near Corinth, which St. Paul might have visited, but was very well aware of as this passage in his letter to the Corinthians shows.

If you want to get an idea of the ways these games went, you might just look at the comic Asterix at the Olympics or just watch the movie. Everybody except Asterix & Obelix is very serious about training, weightlifting, running, boxing. Strict vegetarian diet. 10 months no meat! No wine/beer/alcohol. Not even umqombothi – never mind Marula Cream or Witblits. No sex either – and that for 10 months! That's an entire academic year at Seminary – not just 5 days of the week to go wild and loose goose over the weekend. And at the end everybody has to

¹ Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one gets the prize? Run in such a way as to get the prize. Everyone who competes in the games goes into strict training. They do it to get a crown that will not last, but we do it to get a crown that will last forever. Therefore I do not run like someone running aimlessly; I do not fight like a boxer beating the air. No, I strike a blow to my body and make it my slave so that after I have preached to others, I myself will not be disqualified for the prize. (1Co 9:24-27 NIV)

² The fight took place on 23 September 1983 at the Richfield Coliseum in Richfield, Ohio. Coetzee dominated Dokes after a few rounds of even fighting. The South African led with aggression but also used counter punching as well. Coetzee's poise was apparent, and he boxed more deftly than usual employing more left hooks while still eschewing much in the way of defense, sponging anything Dokes could land and scoring a knockdown. Coetzee knocked out Dokes in the tenth round to become South Africa's first world Heavyweight title holder. He also became the first Caucasian world heavyweight champion in 23 years. The fight was KO Magazine's "Upset of The Year" for 1983. It turned out that the punch that knocked out Dokes hurt Coetzee even more: his right hand was broken and required surgery five days after the fight, in New York.

swear a solemn oath that they've abided by these rules of abstinence, abstinence, fasting and bodily discipline and regimen. All this to strengthen resolve, build physical and mental stamina vigorously. Concentration, determination, endurance, speed and strength is what is called for. For the civilized Greeks & Romans – like Socrates, Epiktet, Seneca, Horace – this egkrateia – selfmastery, self-control, self-restraint and continence, moderation at which the athletes, sportsmen and women were masters - was the foundation of virtue and even religion.

Does St.Paul mean that here in his epistle? Train and you'll get into heaven. Train what? Poverty, obedience and sexual abstinence like in a monastery? Would that be the goal of Seminary too? You know, St.Paul doesn't want to just promote some sort of asceticism. Dr. Martin Luther understood him quite right, when he explained in the 5th main part of his catechism: "Fasting and bodily preparation is, indeed, a fine outward training; but he is truly worthy and well prepared who has faith in these words: Given, and shed for you, for the remission of sins."

St. Paul wants to remind us, that victory comes at a price and because it is so precious it deserves our all and everything. We can loose sight of the goal. We can forfeit victory. We can fall and get lost even though we were once quite at home in the house of our heavenly Father. We are aiming at a imperishable crown and eternal victory. That's why we should not be put off by the hardships of this life – not the 10 months at Seminary every year – not our lowly status as students, vicars and junior pastors or even poor parish priests (cf. Diary of a country priest or watch the film by Bernanos and recommended by Bonhoeffer) – nor by growing old, many hardships, struggles and even suffering pain, loss and eventually even death and dying.

St. Paul shows us how he fights not against this or that. He's fighting his very own old Adam, controlling him, suppressing him, drowning him in the daily return to the baptismal font of grace and divine mercy, love and forgiveness. He enslaves his very own mind, body and soul, encaptures them in godly discipline of the divine will and commandments and learns to live every day by the motto: "Not my, but your will be done!" and the powerful watchword: of this week after the 21st Sunday after Trinity: "Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good." (Rom 12:21 NIV)

St. Paul is not just trying to save his own soul, never mind his own skin. No, he's very aware of his high, beautiful and most wonderful calling as apostle, missionary, evangelist, pastor, teacher and preacher of the gospel. The message of salvation for all people of this world – forgiveness of all sins and iniquities both Jews and Gentiles, blacks and whites, old and young, men and women, indigenous and foreign people, migrants, widows, orphans and even poor and hopeless. He must try and keep up with the hasty gospel, which is moving like hasty summer rains, speeding across the continents, crisscrossing the globe to the very ends of the earth. He must not tarry by the wayside. The godless heathens might die in the meantime – without Christ, without faith, without life and salvation. That's why St. Paul is very much calling to watchfulness, prayerfulness, living up to the high calling of our Lord, who has said: "Like the Father sends me I send you...Therefore go, go, go to all nations, don't forget the Muslims – there are plenty of them without Christ. Don't forget the Chinese, the many Indians and

Japanese either. There are just too many who don't even know the one, who suffered, died and rose for them on the 3rd Day. ³

This is the race against time we're in. This is the race were in against our own complacency, comfort zone and laziness. That's why St.Paul writes of his *modus vivendi*/way of life: *No, I strike a blow to my body and make it my slave so that after I have preached to others, I myself will not be disqualified for the prize.*

Lastly: St. Paul says there's just one winner. Either Springboks/All Blacks or Proteas/India if you prefer. Not both. You can't have more than one winner at the Olympics. That's how things work. We know that. Sometimes we love it. Sometimes we hate it. Depends on whether we're winning or loosing. All are running (pantes treXontes), but just one triumphs and gains the crown of victory, the olive wreath, the world cup so to say. Now the gospel is different and it changes our race and the competition we're in for good. It's better, much better than whatever sport or competition you watch on TV. Yes, it doesn't get better than this Christian gospel. Why? Because IX is the head and we are the members of his body – since Baptism. Through Baptism we are united with Christ. We are part of him and he of us and nothing can pull us asunder. The Father is greater than all and nothing can pull us from his hand. So this IX rose on the third day. He is the firstborn, the frontrunner, the absolute victor and crown bearer of note. He is the triumphant champion, the glorious winner – just watch him harrow hell, ascend exultant into heaven and sitting enthroned at the right hand of the Father with all power, authority and might in heaven and earth his very own. He's got all and everything in his hand. And see – in him – we are winners, victorious too, never loosing out as we stick to him, never to be put to shame trusting in his Lordship and gracious salvation, not discriminated against, but restored by the creator, justified by the ultimate judge, liberated by the saviour, favoured by the heavenly Father, who has adopted us as his very own children, made us princes and princesses in holy Baptism, crowned each one of us with the heavenly crown of grace, bliss and everlasting life, made us the most unlikely candidates true heirs of heaven and the divine habitations, dis disjuncted and disjointed reunited, restored and made one and whole with the holy Trinity forever and ever. In Jesus Christ you've got it all. Rejoice in him our Lord, he is our victor, saviour, our very life and salvation. No need to punch up others. No need to pick your own fights. Rather fight the good fight of faith and overcome evil with good through IX our Lord and our God. To him be glory now and forever. Amen.

And the peace of our God – the Father, Son and Holy Spirit – be with you always + Amen.

³ Remember, what this very apostle St.Paul wrote to the Romans in the 10th chapter? "For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you profess your faith and are saved. As Scripture says, "Anyone who believes in him will never be put to shame." For there is no difference between Jew and Gentile-- the same Lord is Lord of all and richly blesses all who call on him, for, "Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved." How, then, can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them? And how can anyone preach unless they are sent? As it is written: "How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!" (Rom 10:10-15 NIV)