

Thought for the week (from Roots on the Web)

Sports people often stand by each other. At the 2024 Olympic tennis tournament, British player Dan Evans sacrificed the opportunity to defend his title in Washington DC to play alongside Andy Murray in his final ever tournament. Evans knew how much the Olympics meant to Murray and wanted to give him a good send-off. They didn't win a medal and Evans lost more than 110 ranking points because he didn't defend his title. As one commentator said: 'Not all heroes wear capes (or win medals and majors)'.

Even on opposing teams, at the Olympics you see athletes appreciating the talents of others in their field. Many of us can relate to standing by a freezing football pitch or a humid poolside cheering our children on in their activities. Paul himself used the image of the athletics stadium in his second letter to Timothy: 'I have fought the fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. From now on there is reserved for me the crown of righteousness' (similar to a gold medal).

Reading this, you would think that the Epistles would be full of examples of the fledgling church standing together to resist the persecution and hatred of the Roman and Jewish authorities. But in today's Epistle reading, Paul paints a rather different picture. There is a clear sense that Paul had to run this race on his own. When he was imprisoned for his faith no one came to support him. In fact, he says that they deserted him. It's hard to imagine Paul, a respected teacher and church planter, being alone and defenceless at his time of need, mirroring the moment when his Lord and Master stood before the Sanhedrin or prayed in agony in the Garden of Gethsemane. It can happen to us too – when we are suffering for our faith, standing up for what we believe in the schoolyard or workplace, we may suddenly find ourselves terribly alone. Everyone else seems to have melted away. It may only be small comfort to know that when this happens we are following in the footsteps of the heroes of the faith.

Paul's friends may have let him down, but to him this only emphasised how much more God was still on his side. As Paul said in verse 17: 'The Lord stood by me and gave me strength.' He wanted to encourage Timothy to be confident in the Lord in tough times. And these words are for us too:

If the Lord stood by Paul and rescued him from every evil attack, he will also do so for us. This doesn't mean that our lives will be trouble-free. But, as Paul writes to Timothy, even when the life of faith is hard, it's still worth following. Perseverance wins God's approval. We have not been abandoned by God. We can picture God standing on the sidelines and cheering us on. But more than that we can envisage him fighting the lions and demons of our lives with a sword, a light sabre or whatever his weapon of choice is. But he's not just on the sidelines or on our team. He is beside us: like the tennis doubles partners, supporting and working alongside us, carrying our yoke and whispering encouragement into our ears as we sprint together to the finish line.