

Sixth Sunday after Epiphany

Sermon Text – 1 Corinthians 9:24-27

Theme: Running through the mire

Grace, peace and mercy to you from our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ.

During the first weeks of this year, we have been hearing a lot about new beginnings. The beginning of 2009. We heard about and witnessed the beginning of a new school year. All is new, with all the opportunities and hopes that newness brings.

That's exciting, but what happens when the excitement of newness wears off? From where do we summon up the energy to keep striving for the goal, the ultimate prize, the Holy Grail? St Paul writes, urging you on, "Do you not know that in a race all the runners compete, but only one receives the prize? So run that you obtain it." (1 Cor 9:24)

Heavenly Father, may the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts be acceptable to you. Amen.

God's Punishment?

The events of the past week will be burned into the minds of many Australians for many years to come, maybe a lifetime. I was speaking to my mother yesterday and she survived the 1967 bushfires in Hobart in which more than 60 people died. Mum and her family lost their home and all their possessions. All of these memories have come flooding back to her in recent days. Like those who survived the Hobart fires, those who have come through these Victoria fires have in many cases been literally running through the fire and their memories will last a lifetime.

As Christians, what are we to make of events such as we have witnessed in Victoria? What about the flooding here in Far North Queensland? Many of us know people who have been affected, especially in the communities around Ingham. Many people, Christian and non-Christian alike are asking what God's role in events like these might be. Why does a good and loving God allow such destructive events to occur?

Some people have suggested that the fires in Victoria are because the Victorian Government recently passed laws allowing for full-term abortions to take place. The inference being that God is punishing Victoria for passing a bill that is dishonouring and destroying human life that God has created. Let's be clear on this. Tragic events that unfold in our lives are *not* because of God's punishment, not in Victoria, not here in Far North Queensland, not anywhere, not anymore.

At times like this it is worth remembering that according to John's Gospel, the last words Jesus spoke on the cross were, "It is finished." (Jn 19:30) When Jesus died, the work of salvation was completed. He died in the place of all humanity, bearing *all* the punishment that was meant for us. So it makes no sense to suggest that God is punishing Victoria, Queensland or anybody else when bad things happen to us.

What people mistake as punishment is often confused with the *consequences* of our actions, especially our sins. The fires in Victoria aren't punishment from God but the result of sinful people lighting them on purpose. They are the result of carelessness by individuals. They are the result of lightning strikes into a tinder-dry bushland.

Striving for the goal

For those who have lost everything in fires or floods in the past weeks, they must start the rebuilding of their lives, in many cases from scratch. Today's sermon text reminds us of the race we run throughout our lives. Paul uses the imagery of a race to get us to question just what prize it is we are running for.

It makes perfect sense that all the runners in a race are competing for the one prize. We know that in Olympic Games and other competitions medals are awarded for first, second, and third but everyone who fronts up to the starting line is aiming for only one position, first place. That's the goal that they're all striving for. Now to have any hope of achieving this prize, each athlete must train and prepare for the race they are competing in.

And this is the main point Paul is making in this text. To reach the prize, the athletes must deny themselves many things to have any chance of winning. They must avoid the foods that will slow them down – no second helpings of mum's pudding here! But not only must they deny themselves, they must also train to condition their bodies for the physical challenge of competition. Countless hours are put into the

training track to get themselves into peak condition. Then once they are physically in shape, they must prepare their minds to focus on the goal they are striving for. They will be competing against equally well trained and conditioned athletes. Often the only thing that will separate the winners from the losers is the hunger and desire to walk away with the prize. Only when athletes are fully prepared, physically and mentally, are they ready to line up at the start.

It's at this point Paul observes with irony that the athlete is competing for a prize that is perishable. At least today the winners get a medal that will last for some time. In Paul's day, the prize was a wreath made from vines. All that effort for a prize that will wilt within a day!

How does this relate to the race of life that each person runs in? Well those who are bound to the world are learning the hard way that "he who dies with the most toys wins" isn't a very satisfying way to live a life. There are many people who have worked hard, maybe for a lifetime, to achieve the success and wealth that this world offers. They had the nice cars, the flash boat, and the perfect house in the hills or on the waterfront. So quickly all this can be taken from us. How many times over the past week have we seen footage of someone standing in front of what used to be their beautiful home but is now a burnt out heap of rubble? So often they are grateful that they still have just their lives. The trappings of earthly possessions have been stripped away and they have been reminded of what is really precious to them.

The possessions, the prize of this world, will all fade away at some point in time. Paul urges us to run for the greater prize, the eternal prize that God gives.

Striving for God's goal

We are called to compete in the race of life. Hebrews 12:1-2 encourages us, "Since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith." We're not in this race alone, but rather we have a great cheer squad who are there to support us and urge us towards the prize which is held out to all people. This crowd includes all those gathered here in our congregation this day. It includes all Christians who are gathered around God's Holy Word in services all over the world. It certainly includes all the saints who have gone before us. This is the crowd that is urging you on, encouraging you and showing you the way.

But in God's holy race, everyone who competes and stays in the race is guaranteed his eternal prize. Here there are no winners, nor losers. There are only those who compete and those who do not. As competitors we are to do what those who run or compete in any other sport would do. We are to train and we do that by denying ourselves the things that God says are not for us. Don't weigh yourselves down with the burden of sins to carry around. They'll only slow you up. Not only do we deny ourselves, we are called to train by reading, hearing and believing God's Word. The more you get into his Word, the stronger and fitter you will be. Armed with God's Word, you are equipped to fight off the attacks of Satan who tries to trip you up.

Trained and prepared for the race of life, compete knowing that the prize with your name engraved on it is already held out for you. It's not a question of trying or working harder, but rather believing that this is God's gift for you. Knowing, believing and keeping your eye on God's prize frees you up to look around at your fellow competitors. You don't compete *against* them, but *with* them. Encourage and support them to the finish line. Together you will receive God's eternal prize which can never be burned up, washed away or taken from you.

Competing for the trappings of this world, there can only be one winner and the prize is always fleeting. So run *through the mire* of this world and aim for God's goal, trusting that he has your name on it and you will stand on his winning dais, together with your fellow competitors.

The peace of God which passes all understanding, keep guard over your hearts and minds as you are freed through Christ Jesus. Amen.