THE OLYMPICS: A PATTERN FOR THE CHURCH?

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The Olympics provide a wonderful foretaste of the church in Revelation 7. Or do they?
Category: Observations

Over the last week or so, my morning routine has changed. Rather than sitting down to read the news on my phone while I drink my mug of tea, I turn the TV on and watch some sport that I wasn't previously interested in from an arena in Japan. Whether I should actually watch the Olympics is another matter. Ian Paul thinks I shouldn't, but Jeremy Marshall thinks I should, while the Church Times thinks that there is something rotten in the system.

Without weighing in on the morality of the Olympics, I'd like to pick up on a thought which I've come across more than once (Jeremy mentions it in the blog post that I linked to); the idea that the international cooperation and harmony of the Olympics gives a picture of how the church could and should be - perhaps a glimpse of every tribe tongue and nation in Revelation. Personally, I think this idea is profoundly mistaken for a few reasons.

Where is the Lamb?

In Revelation 7 it is not people from every tribe, tongue and nation who are at the centre of things; it is the Lamb on the throne. This might sound a little picky, but it is absolutely key. The church's identity is derived from Jesus not from its members. There are two incidents of people from every nation being gathered together in Scripture. One is in Revelation, where the Lamb is at the centre of things and the other is in Genesis 11 where the nations gather to make a name for themselves. An event which is all about competing and winning medals, fame and renown has far more in common with Babel than it does with the wonderful picture in Revelation.

It's All About Effort

The amount of training and dedication that it takes to be an Olympian is incredible. Not many people have what it takes to be that dedicated and to deal with the pain and the pressure that top level elite sport demands. Paul uses the image of training for the Isthmian Games as an illustration of the dedication required for Christian discipleship. However, the bottom line of Christian faith is that entry to "the games" or the throne room of the Lamb depends on Jesus and his efforts, not ours. Though the elite nature of the Olympics is inspiring, it is antithetical to the nature of the church.

It's All About Countries

Things are a bit restrained this year with the travel ban on spectators, but far from being a picture of international cooperation, the Olympics are a feast of nationalism. There are some moments of

cooperation (such as the wonderful moment where the mens' high jump gold medal was shared). However, a glance at any of the media crowing about how well Team GB are doing (or any other nation) quickly reveals that this has a lot more to do with national glory than any ideal of cooperation. The medal table, the flags and the national anthems show that individual countries are at the centre of the Olympics - this is a long way from the picture of Revelation 7. This doesn't mean that we can't celebrate the glimpses of international harmony that we get in the Olympics, but we have to keep them in perspective.

You Can't Ignore the Money

The Church Times article that I linked to above goes into some detail about the finances of the Olympics and it is absolutely eye-watering. There are issues at the heart of the movement that need to be addressed. However, I'd like to back up a bit and think about finance in relation to the individual nations. It is no surprise that the nations which top the medal table tend to be the richer ones. It takes a lot of money to allow people to train full time to the level that is required in the Olympics. There is no level playing field; this isn't about who is best at sport, it's about who can afford to pay people to train and who can buy the best facilities. Let's just push this on a bit. Often, athletes from less-privileged countries will be able to do well in the Olympics because they are able to get a bursary to train in another country. The US collegiate system is an excellent gateway for many people. However, while helping some individuals, this only serves to highlight the inequalities.

Now don't get me wrong, I enjoy the Olympics. I'll give a cheer when British athletes do well and I may even shed the odd tear. However, we shouldn't be blind to the faults in the movement and those faults mean that any comparisons between the Olympics and the world church need to be heavily qualified.

So what can we say about the world church in the light of the Olympics? Let's briefly recap on the four points that I made.

We mustn't lose sight of the Lamb. In the end, it's all about Jesus; he is the one who broke down the dividing wall between the nations. Celebrity Christianity where we elevate the gold-medal speakers, writers or what have you is the antithesis of what we should be about.

We Depend on Him. Christian discipleship is important. We need to be disciplined in the way that we follow Jesus. However, it doesn't matter where you are from, we are all the same at the foot of the cross. We all need mercy and forgiveness and that only comes through faith in Him.

It's Not About Countries. One of the biggest mistakes of the mission movement has been to assume that the Christian faith is to be equated with a particular culture. The Bible does not come wrapped in a flag and while we should celebrate our differences and the distinctives that we all bring to the church, we must never elevate one country over another or strive to be at the top of the sanctified medal table.

Deal With the Money.

Economic inequalities are part of the life of the world church. In the world we live in, this just can't be avoided. However, as Christians we should work to address some of the issues that are raised. Picking up on the themes higher up, I think it is very sad that very often Christian leaders from the majority world have to travel to the US, UK or elsewhere to receive higher level training. Yes, some international cross-fertilisation is a good thing, but there should be good opportunities for masters and doctoral level studies wherever there are a significant number of Christians. I'll only believe that we've got this right when Brits and Americans start travelling to Africa for post-grad theological studies.