

## **New Year, new start – 2016**

In 2016 let's not begin the year aimlessly but with a hunger for God to break through and a determination to serve His purposes. I hope what I have to say today will be a great encouragement and challenge to serve the purpose of God and to lay aside lesser things.

### **Hebrews 12:1-3**

**"Therefore we also, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which so easily ensnares us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking unto Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith, who for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand side of the throne of God.**

**For consider Him who endured such hostility from sinners against Himself, lest you become weary and discouraged in your souls. *You have not yet resisted to bloodshed, striving against sin. And you have forgotten the exhortation which speaks to you as sons:***

***"My Son, do not despise the chastening of the Lord, Nor be discouraged when you are rebuked by Him; for whom the Lord loves He chastens, And scourges every son whom He receives."***

There are many men and women of faith who have gone ahead of us and this passage of scripture is a challenge to each one of us, to follow their example and to run the race of faith. **We have seen what they saw and seeing changes everything.**

We have a race already marked out for us and the only way to run our race is by keeping our eyes on Jesus. We must never lose sight of Him but fix our gaze on him always. He is the pace setter for the race we run and we must keep in step.

Everyone who competes in a race has the finish line in sight. Sprinters go through phases in their race, the start on the 'B' of the Bang!, the power phase as they break the inertia and get up to speed, the fast endurance phase to the finish, where they push through the finish line. There is little opportunity for the mind to wander in a sprint. It's pretty intense.

But we are not in a sprint. We are in an endurance race, a marathon and in such a race the mind can wander; the finish line is many miles away

and out of sight. Yet runners, run knowing there is a finish line and they will get there if they endure to the end.

There are many metaphors used in scripture describing the Christian life; "fighters" who fight the good fight, "Boxers" who don't beat the air aimlessly, "Good Soldiers" in a battle, "Slaves" who serve a great master, "farmers", "Children", "Wrestlers" who don't wrestle flesh and blood, "Body" each member having a specific function in the purpose of God, "The Vine and branches", "Living Stones" in the building God constructs and many others.

Here though, we are to picture ourselves as the runners in a race. We don't run aimlessly but for an imperishable prize. So picture yourself now as one of the runners ready to go!

### **1 Cor 9:24-27**

***"Do you not know that those who run in a race all run, but one receives the prize? Run in such a way that you may obtain it. And everyone who competes for the prize is temperate (disciplined) in all things. Now they do it to obtain a perishable crown, but we for an imperishable crown.***

***Therefore I run thus, not with uncertainty (with purpose and a certain end in sight). Thus I fight, not as one who beats the air. But I discipline my body and bring it into subjection, lest, when I have preached to others, I myself should become disqualified."***

In any race there are qualifying criteria, there is a starting line, a course marked out and a finish line.

You can be disqualified from even beginning the race and you can be hindered during it but we know for sure, our race, the race of faith is never run in vain.

### **Phil 2:16**

***"Holding fast the word of life, so that I may rejoice in the day of Christ that I have not run in vain or laboured in vain."***

There are certain things we are to hold tight with an iron grip and others we hold loosely or must let go. Those who are in the race, however, carry something of eternal value from start to finish, which must be held fast; - the word of life. This is not a 'fun run' but a race with the greatest possible reward and a matter of life or death.

**To start the race, we begin with a choice.**

**John 1:12** *"But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, to those who believe in His name: who were born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God."*

My race began the moment I chose to lay my life down for Christ.

**I John 5:12,13**

**"He who has the Son has life; he who does not have the Son of God does not have life. These things I have written to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, that you may know that you have eternal life, and that you may continue to believe in the name of the Son of God."**

We live in an age of philosophical uncertainty and most people no-longer know what they believe. Sadly, even in the church many people are also uncertain about what they believe.

The bible teaches us however that one day every person will face Christ at some point.

Jesus made an astonishing claim that's recorded in **John 14:6**

**"I am the way, the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me."**

Everyone must wrestle with the fact that Jesus is who He says He is, or He's the biggest liar and fraud in history.

**Buddah, toward the end of his life said "I am still searching for truth."**

But **Jesus said "I am the truth."**

He is saying **"I am the embodiment of truth and all truth is centred in me."**

We have to have eyes to see. The eyes of unbelievers have been darkened, but God opens our eyes, if only we will receive Him by faith.

When the apostle Paul talks about his conversion in **Acts 26:18** he says that God chose to use him to **"open their eyes, in order to turn them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan to God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins and an inheritance among those who are sanctified by faith in me."**

Paul had a race of faith marked out for him from the moment he turned to Christ. It was actually marked out before then, but revealed to him at conversion. God has called each of us and we too need to enter into the race marked out. He chooses to work through us to open eyes and turn people to the light.

The starting line is Christ Crucified. We come to the cross, to Christ, who died for our sins that we might have new life.

**Gal' 2:20 "I have been crucified with Christ, I no-longer live but Christ lives in me. The life I now live in the flesh is by faith in the Son of God who loved me and gave Himself for me."**

I am convinced there are many people who have said the words of the sinners' prayer and have never truly given themselves to God. A form of words, just will not do. There has to be an opening of the eyes and deep conviction from the Holy Spirit of our sinfulness and our need for a saviour. We have to come to the foot of the cross and die with Him. **Mere profession of words is not true conversion, we must take hold of Christ and truly proclaim Him Lord of our lives.**

When we give ourselves to Christ, a new principle is born in us.

**2 Cor 5:17**

**"Therefore if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; old things have passed away; behold, all things have become new."**

You simply cannot run the race of faith until you come to Christ and receive Him, by faith.

J C Rile puts it really well when he writes in his book "Old Paths"

**"Yes! It is not a little mending and alteration, -- a little cleansing and purifying, a little painting and patching, -- a little whitewashing and varnishing, -- a little turning over a new leaf and putting on a new outside that is wanted. It is the bringing in of something altogether new, the planting within us of a new nature, -- a new being, -- a new principle, -- a new mind; this alone, and nothing less than this, will ever meet the necessities of a man's soul. We need not merely a new skin, but a new heart."**

**Remember those who have gone ahead of us and learn from them.**

As we go forward as a church. Those of us who are more mature in the faith need to encourage and disciple the younger in the faith. We will be starting a number of courses such as "Christianity Explored, Discipleship Explored, Freedom in Christ, The Marriage Course, there is children's work, nurture, stewarding, welcoming, worship, small groups etc. All are opportunities to mentor and disciple others. To rub alongside and grow together. To pass the baton.

Hebrews 12 gives us the idea that we are in a stadium with crowds of former champions present and cheering us on. We know of course the scriptures are simply reminding us of those who have gone before and

encouraging us to remember their faith. We are not being told here that there are spirits sitting around watching our lives and commenting on our performance! The idea you can pray to dead saints is a false one. We pray to Our Father in Heaven and have free access through the blood of Christ. We pray equally to Jesus and the Holy Spirit in the knowledge that we have One God who is 'Father', Son, and 'Holy Spirit'. But we certainly do not pray to the spirits of dead saints. We have a living, resurrected Christ and all authority and power is found in Him.

We are exhorted to **"look to Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith."**

We have all watched those races where there is someone going for a world record. In the race there are those who are willing to sacrifice their own race in order to set the pace for another. It becomes a team effort. The pace setter knows exactly how fast the pace has to be, if the runner is to set a new world record. That person will run at a pace that is actually too fast for him or her to maintain for any length of time, so when they have done their part they drop out. This then allows the person setting the record to stay on pace and push to the end.

**We are to look to Jesus as our ultimate example of faith. He will lead us all the way and not drop out of the race before we reach the goal!** He has shown us the way to the Father.

He endured the cross because He saw beyond it, despising its shame, knowing the cross would put an end to the power of sin and death. He is now the beginning, (the author) and the end (finisher) of our faith. He is again with the Father and has set a clearly trodden way so that we may follow in his footprints.

The word used for "way" is a trodden path. Like walking in the fells. There are clearly trodden paths that mark the way to the summit. They have not been dug by human labour but have formed naturally in the landscape by common use.

We can choose to follow Him along the narrow trodden path that leads to eternal life, the race marked out for us, but there is an alternative; a road he calls "broad way" that many people travel without Him, it's is a highway to destruction.

**So, in our faith race, we have a starting line, a path marked out and the runners. The qualifying runners all know Christ, they know the way and they are all running. "All the runners must run." Every one of us today who knows Christ is running!**

This is not a race in which runners compete against each other. Every runner can win. You have been set a race to run. It's your race to win.

### **Anecdote – Chris Akabusi**

*Chris Akabusi used to give a motivational talk which he entitled "Adapt or Die" and I heard him give the talk many years ago.*

*Chris was a 400m runner but never really achieved great success at this event. Roger Black said he must "adapt or die" as an athlete, so at 28 years of age he decided to change his event to a more technical one, the 400m hurdles. Others said he was mad to do this so late in his career. However he was right and became the British no1 in the event for 5 years and broke the British record.*

*Probably his greatest sporting achievement was in the 1991 Tokyo World Championship 400m relay final. The main rivals were the American team, which was the fastest team in the world and had never been beaten. The Americans Always won.*

*The British runners were good but they did not have the quickest runners, which is quite important if you want to win a race! In the British team there was Roger Black, Derek Redmond, John Regis and finally Chris Akabusi.*

*Roger Black was the quickest British 400m runner at the time and the European Champion. He is the guy you put on the final 400m, the 'glory leg!'*

*But the British team were just that. 'A Team.' They took a risk and decided to run their quickest runners in the first legs of the relay, simply to keep up with the Americans. They figured that if they kept in contention throughout the race, the Americans may be put off their stride and focus on the opposition rather than their own race. The third leg of the race was run by big John Regis who was actually a 200m runner, but if he was close you'd know, you would hear his thundering steps and see his imposing body bulk.*

*Chris Akabusi was a grafter who would keep going to the end and the team knew if they could stay in contention to the end, he may just see them through, by sheer grit and determination. It was a long shot, but they could not make themselves faster than they were and had to find another way to win.*

*The American team didn't spend their time working on tactics, but arguing over who would run the 'glory leg'. Who would wave their arms to the cameras and get the plaudits for the win. They were so confident*

*about their speed and ability as individuals, it wasn't about whether they would win, but who should go across the finish line to get the glory. If you watch the race, it's amazing to see how the British team tactics worked. Sure enough, they kept in contention from start to finish and beat the Americans over the finish line.*

*We are in the race together! The team won the race and every member received the gold medal. The Americans had to stand on the lower step and look up at the whole team that beat them. No matter how well any individual on the American team may have run, they failed to work as a team and lost. Shame!*

We do compete, not against each other but against three enemies. The world, the flesh and the devil. We can live victorious lives but not in isolation.

To win the race the runners have to **lay aside any weight** or hindrance **and sin** that ensnares. We should also run with **all our might**.

It's interesting that the scripture in Hebrews refers to the things that "*weigh us down*" and separately to "*sin*".

It suggests there are things that slow us down (excess weight – too much turkey & pud!) and things that set us back and take us off track all together (sin).

Greek runners ran light. In fact they ran almost naked so as not to have any clothing flapping in the wind and dragging them back. They knew about aerodynamics!

I need to ask myself. "What is slowing me down?"

"What is important and priority in my life?"

"Is anything an encumbrance to me?"

What about the amusements of the world?

To muse, is to think and 'amuse' is not to think. We need both in balance but appear to live in a world with so much to amuse us, that we rarely stop to think and consider what really matters or even to meditate on the word of God.

The world has amusements tailor made for every personality. Some of these amusements become addictive habits that are difficult to break.

If you are struggling consider Freedom in Christ or Celebrate Recovery – we all need to discover our true identity and find freedom in Christ, to live as God has called us to live.

Satan wants to stop us thinking, or to think upon the wrong things with false goals and ambitions.

Angry birds, Soda Crush, facebook and any number of games can take hours from our day and distract us from godly thinking.

Friendships and those we keep company with can slow you down. Keep good company.

Personal habits such as:

Use of time, money, personal plans and commitments (un-blessed plans, done without any thought to our relationship to God, church family, your own family life or your personal wellbeing and growth in God.

What about those Social habits or unsocial habits!

TV, the type of music you listen to, the books you read, social circles you mix with, films you choose to watch, etc.

I am not talking hear about legalistic Christianity, or withdrawing from our call to be salt and light in the world, but simply asking what is it that consumes my time and energy? Am I allowing anything in my life to hinder my race of faith? Has anything cut in on me and is anything weighing me down?

**There are things we must run away from and things we are to pursue:**

**2 Tim2:22**

***Flee also youthful lusts; but pursue righteousness, faith, love, peace with those who call on the Lord out of a pure heart.***

The "**also**" refers to what Paul said earlier about arguing about words, about profane speech, idle talk and reasoning the word of God in such a way as to deny the truth and power of it. Such things spread like cancer and undermines faith.

We also must run/flee from the things listed in **1Tim 6:11,12**

***"But you, O man of God, flee these things and pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, patience, gentleness. Fight the good fight of faith, lay hold on eternal life...."***

What are we? "**Men of God!**"

This is our true identity in Christ and how we should live. Not in a worldly manner but godly lives. Living out of our true identity in Christ.

### **What is this scripture telling us to flee?**

#### **Error and greed.**

See verses 3-10

V3 false teachers who do not conform to Christ's teaching

V4 an obsession with disputes, arguments, envy, strife, reviling, evil suspicions.

V5 useless wranglings of men of corrupt minds who think godliness is a means to personal gain.

Flee from discontent (*always wanting something else and never satisfied with what you have*) but rather have godliness with contentment.

Run from the **desire for worldly goods** for we can take nothing out of the world.

Don't fall into the **trappings of money** loving. V9 A trap, snare, that brings foolish and harmful lusts causing men to drown in their own destruction.

Jesus also taught much about these things. The weeds that strangle the life out of you and make you unfruitful and unfulfilled.

### **Travel light, is the exhortation. It's for our own good.**

All this extra weight will be a great burden. The word "**weight**" also can mean "BULK" and speaks of superfluous flesh. Overweight, fat, flabby Christians.

Runners remove any warm up cloths before the race. They shed all excess baggage and get themselves fit and lean. As we travel, we can choose to shed it or slow down and rest in order to carry it further.

The point is, **we can't carry everything from our past with us on the journey of faith.** There are some things we have to cast off.

### **What is the sin?**

At its heart, all sin is unbelief or false belief.

Sin says we will get gratification in a way that God says we won't.

The original sin was the false belief that God was holding out on them.

That there is something better and God just doesn't want us to have the best.

The encouragement is that we must do all it takes to win.

### **Phil 3:12-14**

## **Reaching forward, pressing on, those things that are ahead etc**

We are not running aimlessly but toward the goal, knowing we have an upward call becoming like Christ and living for Christ.

I am a big fan of J C Rile. Again, in his book 'Old Paths'  
He writes:

**"We live in an age when there is a false glare on the things of time, and a great mist over the things of eternity"**

Many people have allowed a mist to fall over their lives that has obscured the great hope of eternity.

"This body of ours, which takes up so much of our thoughts and time, to warm it, dress it and make it comfortable, - this body is not all the man. It is but the lodging of a noble tenant, and that tenant is the immortal soul! The death which each of us has one day to die does not make an end of the man."

"Live as if you really believed that we were not sent into the world merely to spin cotton, and grow corn, and hoard up gold, but to "glorify God and enjoy Him forever." Read your bible, and become acquainted with its contents. Seek the Lord in prayer, and pour out your heart before Him. Go to the place of worship regularly, and hear the gospel preached. Keep the Sabbath holy, and give God His day. And if any ask you the reason why: if wife, or child, or companion say, "What are you about?" - answer them boldly, like a man, and say. "I do these things because I have a soul."

Many of these sentiments sound so old fashioned and out of date to the church of today. Maybe, however, we should stop and ask ourselves; "What am I about? What really matters to me? Have I strayed from the narrow way and onto the broad road once again?"

He goes on to say

"I warn every one to beware of a hope not drawn from scripture. It is a false hope, and many will find out this to their cost. That glorious and perfect book, the Bible, however men despise it, is the only fountain out of which man's soul can derive peace."

"Let the time past suffice for a mere formal, aimless, meaningless, comfortless religion. Lay it aside, -- lay it aside, -- lay it aside forever. Be real; be thorough; be in earnest. Deal with your soul as a reasonable being; deal with it as one who feels that eternal interests are at stake,

deal with it as one who has made up his mind, and is determined to live in suspense no longer.”

We don't run aimlessly. We have an end in sight that should determine the choices we make and the very course of our lives.

Let 2016 be a year in which we lay aside all that hinders and run with perseverance the race marked out.

Amen

Finish with Matt Redmond "Abide with me" - Love that will not ever let me go, you will not ever let me go.