

‘The Epiphany 0001, the Olympics 2012 and Us 2013’

One TV programme over the recent holiday period stood out for me. It was a BBC compilation of the top 50 July Olympic moments. It was fun and interesting to see again some of the great moments of those three weeks. It was great to see some great moments that I’d heard about but hadn’t seen before. I particularly enjoyed seeing the Kenyan David Rudisha’s world record breaking win in the men’s 800 metres, He strode out in front and never once allow anyone to challenge him: he just looked ahead and powered straight to the finishing line. Magnificent!

It was, of course, thrilling to see Usain Bolt at number 2 in the top 50 chart winning the men’s relay and the 100 and 200 meter races for little Jamaica – beating other nations, including the mighty USA by a long way. It was fantastic to re-see Mo Farah winning both the 5000 and 10000 metres for this country. But even better was re-living and seeing some of the atmosphere:

Sir Steve Redgrave played a major part – hugging people wherever he came across them – by the water at Eton Dorney or on the track in the Olympic Stadium or anywhere he felt like it. He’s clearly a physical bloke in more ways than one! Our pioneer female boxing champion Nicola Adams clearly enthused loads of other competitors with her bouncy personality and winning and constant smile. But this TV programme of top 50 moments didn’t just include celebrations of British athletes or gold medal moments.

It was moving to see recognition given once again to the athlete from the Saharan desert country of Niger who took to the water in a single scull and came truly last – but was cheered to the skies as he did so. Here were barriers being broken, expectations turned upside down. And it was even more moving to see Sarah Attar, Saudi Arabia’s only female competitor, head and neck covered in a scarf, running as fast as she could –but still coming last in one of the heats for the women’s 800m race. Again, the crowd sheered her to the skies. This glimpse into a future of greater equality and justice for Saudi Arabian women was something to truly treasure. Again barriers being broken, expectations turned upside down.

When these pictures of Olympic moments to savour - both in the July and the September Paralympics - are boiled down, what are we left with? The answer, I suggest, is something rather remarkable. Those weeks gave us an experience of a society more ‘whole’ than we are regularly used to. We saw and experienced Paralympic athletes receiving the same packed out attention and the same rapturous applause in September as their fellow athletes did six weeks earlier.

And perhaps in the Somali-born Mo Farah being recognised as a thorough-going Briton, we could see and experience Great Britain being and becoming something of the ‘Rainbow’ nation which South Africa is already.

In total I dare to say that we saw and experienced the world more as God means and wills it to be. Might it be that the legacy of the Olympics and Paralympics is spiritual as much as sporting? Perhaps so, if, as I suggest, this great summer of sport gave us a foretaste – but an actual experience nevertheless – of the world as God means and will it to be.

All of which can help us now consider Matthew’s story of the Wise Men. Because what we see in this story is: God inviting people of radically different culture and outlook to mix. What we see is: people who are very different from the norm being able to discern and respond faithfully to God’s call. What we see is: people the ‘in-group’ would normally call ‘outsiders’ actually being on the inside track of God’s will and activity.

Matthew is rightly celebrated for ending his Gospel with what is known as 'The Great Commission'. In the final chapter and the final verses of the book Matthew has Jesus declaiming to his disciples 'Go and make disciples of all nations. Baptise them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit'... 'Go and make disciples of all nations....'

But let's note this: what Jesus asks his disciples to do in Matthew chapter 28 is already happening in Matthew chapter 2. People from beyond Israel, non-Jews, Gentiles – the Wise Men – are already recognising Jesus as the Son of God as they bow before him in Bethlehem. God's task of inviting people to recognise his presence in Jesus Christ - and of them responding – is going on already. The Wise Men coming from another culture and presenting their gifts is a sign of the peace, harmony and discipleship which God wants for the whole world. The Wise Men's journey symbolises the journey to Christ which God calls each and every person in the world to make.

And our reading from Isaiah offers a similar vision. The prophet Isaiah paints a picture in beautiful words of God calling people from all over the world to live peaceably and justly together, worshipping God, the source of love, peace and justice as revealed to Israel with its centre of worship in Jerusalem.

Our 2012 Olympic experience – of people coming together, getting on and celebrating diversity, equality and so much held in common – gently mirrors the story of the Wise Men. We this year, like the Wise Men, have been granted a foretaste, a preview of what it's like to put differences behind us and realise, amidst all our diversity, the common bonds we share as children of God.

The thing is: none of this greater realisation of God's will comes about on its own. Human beings – people like you and me – have to participate with God's Spirit and make things happen on the ground. Just as there was a whole army of people behind the scenes who made it possible for the man from Niger to row his race or the female runner from Saudi Arabia to run her race, so God needs an army of people to be at work and on the move, bringing about the extension of his kingdom. God calls us to be active 'Kingdom makers' just as Lord Coe and his team called 70,000 people to be Gamesmakers. If we don't act, things can quickly drift. Think what happened as soon as the Paralympics were over – the sports news was immediately full of stories about racism in football and inappropriate texts sent by a top cricketer.

On page 2 of your weekly sheets you'll see the words of a hymn: each verse ends with words taken from the prophet Micah. These words, I suggest, encapsulate the foretaste of God's kingdom that we experienced last summer – of barriers being broken down, of diversity being celebrated, of people being applauded not for coming first but for daring to break moulds and pointing towards a better, more just future. 'Do justly, love mercy, walk humbly with your God'. These are Micah's words – from Micah chapter 6 verse 8

But I offer them to you now on this first, Epiphany Sunday of 2013. In the journey of the Wise Men we see people willing and able to travel, to walk humbly with and towards God: in the story of the Wise Men we see God acting justly and being loving and merciful.

Gentiles, non-Jews ...outsiders, people beyond the pale are, in Matthew's scheme of things, invited into relationship with Christ even before Jesus has grown up and started his public ministry.

So we too can play our part in 2013 by being 'Kingdom makers'. With the glowing memory of the Olympic games and Games makers behind us, let's move forward together in 2013 to 'Do justly, love mercy and walk humbly with our God'.