

Homily for November 29, 2009 (1st Sunday of Advent)

It is often said the life is not a sprint but a marathon. As someone who has run my share of marathons , I can relate to that!

The original distance of the race, 24.8 miles, was based on the legendary run that Phidippedes made from plains of Marathon to Athens to announce the victory of the Athenians over a much larger force of Persians. According to this legend, upon completing his journey Phidippedes joyfully cried out, “Rejoice! We conquer!” Then he collapsed and died.

It’s not exactly the kind of story you want to hear at the starting line! Whether true or not, that same distance of 24.8 miles between Marathon and Athens was run when the modern Olympics started again in 1896 and continued until the London games of 1908, where it was lengthened to the now well-known 26.2 miles. The reason? King Edward VII and Queen Alexandria wanted to see both the start from Windsor Castle and the finish from their private box in the Olympic Stadium.

Power, as they say, has its privileges; and runners have been paying the price ever since. To the uninitiated, an added 1.4 miles to a nearly 25-mile race might not seem like much. But they don’t know what it’s like to hit “the wall.” That’s the point, typically at around 20 miles, when your muscles stop burning glycogen and switch to burning fat. That may sound good at first; but unfortunately the body burns fat much less efficiently than carbohydrates like glycogen. So essentially you spend the last six miles trying to run with hypoglycemia. It’s not fun.

While good training and conditioning can help, it cannot guarantee that a runner will escape. Inevitably, no matter how much you prepare or try to avoid it, “the wall” in some form will find you, especially if you start too fast. For many the difference between a slower but manageable final six miles and a death march, between finishing and dropping out, is not “hitting the wall” but finding your way through it. In other words, *you have to know where the door is.*

Roughly 20-25 years after Jesus’ death and resurrection, the early Christian community found itself hitting a wall of sorts in the form of many challenges. One of these was the integration of gentiles into a church that was rooted in the Jewish traditions and scriptures of Jesus and his disciples. This is well-documented in the Acts of the Apostles, particularly in Chapter 15 and the controversy over circumcision and how it was resolved by what has come to be known as the Council of Jerusalem.

However, we can see elsewhere in the New Testament (e.g. in Galatians 2) and even in Acts (16:1-5) that this decision did not totally settle the conflict. In addition, there were divisions over leadership (1 Corinthians 3), claims of discrimination (Acts 6), and other difficulties that threatened their communion with each other.

In the midst of all of this, the members of the early church also found themselves confronting a wall of anxiety. They had to contend with persecutions, particularly by the Roman authorities and strictly observant Jews who looked upon them as a strange and threatening sect. This was all compounded by the expectation that many had that Jesus' promised return in glory was imminent. This expectation is explicit in St. Paul's earliest letter, 1 Thessalonians which was written c. 50 CE, making it the oldest book of the New Testament.

In 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18, for example, one can feel Paul's great excitement and anticipation at being "caught up together" with "the dead in Christ" to "meet the Lord in the air" and remain with him forever. It would be the ultimate fulfillment of the hopes expressed by Jeremiah and the other prophets: the final and eternal reunification and indwelling of God and his people. Thus Paul prayed that the Lord would enable the community at Thessalonika to "increase and abound in love," to be strengthened, and "to be blameless in holiness before our God and Father at the coming of the Lord Jesus with all his holy ones."

There was just one problem: the years went on and the parousia did *not* arrive. People who had been expecting "the day of the Lord" to "come like a thief in the night" began to realize that he may not return when they anticipated. In fact, he may not return in their lifetimes!

By the time the Gospel of Luke was written, c. 70 CE or after, many of the people to whom St. Paul had written 1 Thessalonians had hit the ultimate wall: they were dead. Indeed, Paul himself had already been martyred. It was dawning on the church that while "the day of the Lord" could come very soon, it could also be many years, even generations away. Having hit this wall, how could they maintain hope and have a renewed motivation to continue to grow in holiness and fulfill the mission of Jesus that had been handed on to them?

They needed to find a door and found it in the words of Jesus that were handed on to them, including those we heard in today's gospel reading. Jesus urged them to be aware of the signs in the world around them, to stand before God in hope rather than fear, to avoid complacency, to be vigilant and to pray for

strength—all with the realization that the exact day and hour is something none of them could know. In short, they needed to stop training to sprinters and learn to be marathon runners! The signs of the day of the Lord were all around them; but they were so *every day!*

The church had already witnessed the cataclysmic experience of the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem in 70 CE. This was the very place where generations of people believed that God dwelled with his people forever; yet it had been reduced to rubble. Somehow the world went on...and so did God...and so must God's people. Centuries later, we too must still go on, to make our way through the walls we face.

As we begin a new church year, I invite you to spend the next week reflecting on a prayer that is said at every Mass, immediate after the Our Father. It may pass our ears unnoticed, but its words are especially poignant for us during this season of Advent and this time of waiting: *“Deliver us, Lord, from every evil and grant us peace in our day. In your mercy keep us free from sin and protect us from all anxiety, as we wait in joyful hope for the coming of our Savior, Jesus Christ.”* When we hit the wall, may we also find the door! +