

## SERMON FOR PALM SUNDAY

(Cape Town - 16 March 2008)

**Text:** Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles, and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us. <sup>2</sup> Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. <sup>3</sup> Consider him who endured such opposition from sinful men, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart. (Hebrew 12:1-3)

It is really hard to believe that is already Palm Sunday, the Sunday that leads into Holy Week. Today we commemorate that final stage of Jesus' journey, as he rode on the back of a donkey into the city of Jerusalem. This journey was planned long ago, when God in heaven decided to send his Son into the world. Here on earth it started in the small town of Bethlehem, where Jesus was born, and eventually was completed about 30 years later when on the cross of Calvary he was crucified just outside the city walls of Jerusalem.

On this Sunday the focus is not only on Jesus' journey, but our own journey as we follow him. The image used in our text, however, is not that of a "journey", but rather that of a "race".

The difference between the two words reminded me of what I did last week. Earlier last week I "journeyed" through Cape Town with some visitors from the USA who were also in our church two Sunday ago. The journey with them most enjoyable and not strenuous at all. Relaxed in our small, yet air-conditioned car, we cruised around the Peninsula and enjoyed the scenic beauties of the Cape.

But Sunday last week, I together with my son Peter, and 35 thousand other cyclists started a "race" around the very same Peninsula, called the Pick 'n Pay, Cape Argus Cycle Race.

And indeed a "race", or a "marathon" is a great metaphor to describe our life on earth as we follow Jesus to our final destination.

Today I will highlight some of the aspect that this metaphor of a race teaches us of our Christian life.

First, in a race, in particular a marathon race, the start is not so important. Instead it is all about crossing that finishing line.

Those of you are cyclists or marathon runners will know that invariably at every big race you have those "great" starters. When that gun signals the start of the race, they shoot off like an arrow from a highly strung bow. At maximum speed they race ahead. The adrenalin is bumping. Their hearts are beating. This is the day, they have been waiting for.

But it doesn't take long and their strength begins to wane. When they come to that first major hill, called Smith's Winkel, just the other side of Simonstown, they begin to struggle. It is almost as if they never realised that there are hills and mountain passes along the route. When they hit the bottom of Chapman's Peak somewhat later, they begin to doubt whether it was a good idea to

enter the race in the first place. In fact, in the past there have been numerous times when I myself said: “Why in the world are you punishing yourself”.

At that point the initial euphoria of starting the race is over. The race is a struggle. The legs cramp, the lungs scream for air. The sweat streams down your face. You are seriously tempted to get off your bike.

In the Argus most cyclists, however, still make it up Chapman’s Peak. Once you have reached the top of Chapman’s Peak you can literally relax and free-wheel all the way down to Hout Bay. And just when you have re-captured your breath, you look up and you see the dreaded “Suikerbossie”.

For some this final hurdle is a step too far. They start looking to the sides. They see people relaxing around tables under a shaded roof. In their hands they hold a “cool drink”, or even icy cold beer. There is chatter and laughter. For some cyclists this is too much. They pull over. They stop the race. And like those who never entered the race, they don’t complete it.

The race of life, following Jesus, is not about the start. To start a race is easy. It is all about completing the race and hearing those words of Jesus as you cross the finishing line: “***You faithful servant. Enter the glory of your God.***” If you hear those words, ever struggle, ever pain along the way was worth it.

The second point is closely related to the first. To complete the race that God marked out for, you need endurance and perseverance.

In the new South Africa we are sometimes so critical of those who believe that everything will just fall into their lap. We all know, to make it to the top you need endurance and perseverance. But that applies to your Christian life as well. There are mountains to be climbed on this route. You will be tempted to give up.

Jesus was tempted in the desert. Exhausted, tired, hungry, the devil approached him and said: “Why don’t just turn those stones into bread? And why are journeying to the cross?. Jump down from the temple top. The masses will follow you.” But the race that was marked out for him had a goal. He was to die for the sins world. This journey was never going to be easy. But Jesus persevered.

We are to persevere. And by the way, this is one of the reasons, why I encouraged my son to take up cycling. Of course, I like cycling. And of course, I like cycling with him. But I also want to teach him: “You don’t give up - even less so as a follower of Jesus.”

Thirdly, this race you don’t do alone. I talked about it last Sunday. Cyclist race in a peloton. Together in a group they help each other. They make turns to lead the group and face the wind. When they tire they sit back and enjoy the slipstream. But you don’t race alone.

The same applies to our Christian life. You don’t ever embark on this race alone. You become a member of the “body [the peloton] of Christ”. Alone you may even manage quite a few kilometres. But believe me, it is not wise. Some hills are just too steep. And you need those friends that help, support, and encourage you.

This is highlighted in our text. We read about the Christians being surrounded by a “cloud of witnesses.” But here the reference is not to the fellow racers (who form a cloud around you), but to those who have completed the race of life and are standing on the sides. You don’t see them. Abraham, Moses, David, Peter, Mary Magdalene, Paul, Lydia... your grandfather, your grandmother, maybe your brother or sister. They line the street. And they are the “real” supporters.

There are always disinterested people, or hecklers along the way: “Why are you racing? Why are you a Christian? Why do you go to church every Sunday?” But those who have completed the race, those who already enjoy the glory of God, they sing a different song. They know, the race is worth it. They *know* how your legs hurt when you go up Suikerbossie. And they encourage: “Don’t give up. It is not far. You will make it.”

Fourthly, our text provides us with some personal tips on completing the race.

Here is the first one: “**Throw off everything that hinders you**”. Cyclists know exactly what that means. You don’t take something along that you don’t really need during the race. And it is surprising how little you need.

Sometimes we go through life “wanting” so much. Sometimes it is material possessions: a bigger house, a bigger car. Sometimes it is honour or status. We do everything, work until passed midnight, just to be lauded or accepted by others. But we don’t “need” all of these things. Life is short. You just overload yourself. And comes “Hout Bay” you stop.

But there is something else that sometimes hinders us in this race. And that is sin. The writer of this letter speaks about sin that “entangles” us. How many followers of Christ carry sin along? Sometimes it is bitterness. Sometimes a relationship that is not right, or wrong friends that side-track you all the time. Put the sin down. Confess it. And enjoy the freedom that God provides through forgiveness.

But here is the key: “**Fix your eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith.**” Nothing is as important in a race than “focus”. Where is your focus? Jesus didn’t just complete this race and now watches you racing. He is with you in this race. In fact he is right in front of you, showing you the way. But where is your focus?

So often we look away. We look at our unbelieving friends that seem to be far better off than we are. Or we look at those things that worry us. And the longer we look at them, the more they begin to master us.

“No”, in the race of life, you focus on Jesus. In short this means: You trust him. You put your faith in him. He provides you with this faith. It means having an “undivided heart” Nothing messes our life up more than having a divided heart. Fixing my eyes on Jesus means: I know my priority in life. It is HIM. It means I trust his promises: “**Behold, I am with you always, to the very end of the age**” (Mt.28:20).

Does this mean (trusting Jesus): No Chapman’s Peak, no Suikerbossie? Of course not. In the Garden of Gethsemane Jesus had such a struggle, that his sweat fell to the ground like drops of

blood. And we will have times when we doubt and are uncertain. We will have times when we fall. In every race some people fall. But when we lie on the ground and look up, guess who is there? Jesus! And he takes our hand.

Let me conclude with the very same words of the last verse of our text. When you in following Jesus struggle in life, then ***“consider him who endured such opposition from sinful men, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart.”*** Amen.

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