

I've never done this before but today I'd like to build the teaching part of our gathering around the story of a man who died 73 years ago, in a Japanese Prison Camp in China.

We watched very little of the Commonwealth Games, I tried to keep up with the medal table (being an interested kiwi) and saw some highlights but we were too busy doing other stuff, being on retreat, taking a wedding, spending time at Carey College, buying warm clothes because at one point it was quite cold in Auckland, trying to cope with the humidity at other times, meeting the people we began training with over 44 years ago, gathering with nieces and nephews who've gone over to the dark side (live in Auckland) etc. etc.

On a university track in Toronto, a young woman is running laps, clocking her time as she goes. Those coaching, others watching, are only interested in whether she's good enough for the next athletics. They have no idea that she is the descendant of an Olympic legend and that linked to her inherited talent is a story which can make grown men weep - which it has done for me on many occasions.

I'd like to do two things – firstly give a few details of Eric's life and secondly take some things he said and relate them to Biblical truth.

Eric Henry Liddell was born in China to Scottish missionary parents. He attended boarding school near London, and afterwards attended the University of Edinburgh.

He played Rugby for Scotland in 1922-3 and in 1923 broke the British record for the 100 yards – a record that would stand for 23 years.

At the 1924 Summer Olympics in Paris, Liddell refused to run in the heats for his favoured 100 metres because they were held on a Sunday. Instead he competed in the 400 metres held on a weekday. On the morning of the Olympic 400 metres final, July 11, 1924, Liddell was handed a folded square of paper, a gift from one of the team physios. Reading it later he found the message: 'in the old book it says: 'He that honours me I will honour, wishing you the best of success always.' He recognised the (slightly misquoted) reference to 1 Samuel 2:30, Liddell was profoundly moved that someone other than his coach believed in him and the stance he had taken.

The pipe band of the 51st Highland Brigade played outside the stadium for the hour before he ran. The 400 metres had been considered a middle-distance event in which runners raced round the first bend and coasted through the back leg.

Inspired by the Biblical message, and deprived of a view of the other runners because he drew the outside lane, Liddell raced the whole of the first 200 metres to be well clear of the favoured Americans. With little option but to then treat the race as a complete sprint, he continued to race round the final bend. He was challenged all the way down the home straight but held on to take the win. He broke the Olympic and world records with a time of 47.6 seconds.

He returned to China in 1925 to serve as a missionary teacher. Aside from two furloughs in Scotland, he remained in China until his death in a Japanese civilian internment camp in 1945. During his first furlough from missionary work in 1932, he was ordained a minister of religion. On his return to China he married Canadian woman Florence Mackenzie whose parents were also missionaries.

In his last letter to his wife, written on the day he died, Liddell wrote of suffering a nervous breakdown due to overwork. He actually had an inoperable brain tumour; overwork and malnourishment may have hastened his death. Liddell died on 21 February 1945, five months before the end of World War II.

Langdon Gilkey later wrote, 'The entire camp, especially its youth, was stunned for days, so great was the vacuum that Eric's death had left. According to a fellow missionary, Liddell's last words were, 'it's complete surrender.'

56 years after the 1924 Paris Olympics, Scotsman Allan Wells won the 100 metre sprint at the 1980 Moscow Olympics. When asked after the victory if he had run the race for Harold Abrahams, the last 100 metre Olympic winner from Britain (in 1924) who had died two years previously, Wells replied, 'no, I would prefer to dedicate this to Eric Liddell.'

Gifts and God-given abilities

'God made me fast. And when I run, I feel His pleasure. I believe God made me for a purpose, but he also made me fast. The secret of my success over the 400m is that I run the first 200m as fast as I can. Then, for the second 200m, with God's help I run faster.'

Genesis 1:28

So God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them

1 Peter 2:10

Each of you should use whatever gift you have received to serve others, as faithful stewards of God's grace in its various forms.

Obedience

'Obedience to God's will is the secret of spiritual knowledge and insight. It is not willingness to know, but willingness to DO God's will that brings certainty. If you commit yourself to the love of Christ, then that is how you run a straight race.'

John 14:21

Whoever has my commands and keeps them is the one who loves me.

John 14:23

'Anyone who loves me will obey my teaching.

John 15:10

If you keep my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commands and remain in his love.

Guidance

'If you are not guided by God, you will be guided by something or someone else.'

Proverbs 14:12

**12 There is a way that appears to be right,
but in the end it leads to death.**

Proverbs 3:5-6 New International Version - UK (NIVUK)

5 Trust in the Lord with all your heart
and lean not on your own understanding;
6 in all your ways submit to him,
and he will make your paths straight.

Witness

‘We are all missionaries. Wherever we go we either bring people nearer to Christ or we repel them from Christ.’

John 15:16

¹⁶ You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you so that you might go and bear fruit – fruit that will last – and so that whatever you ask in my name the Father will give you.

Colossians 4:5-6

5 Be wise in the way you act towards outsiders; make the most of every opportunity. 6 Let your conversation be always full of grace, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how to answer everyone.

Challenges

‘Circumstances may appear to wreck our lives and God's plans, but God is not helpless among the ruins. God's love is still working. He comes in and takes the calamity and uses it victoriously, working out His wonderful plan of love.’

Isaiah 41

13 For I am the Lord your God
who takes hold of your right hand
and says to you, do not fear;
I will help you.

Isaiah 43

‘Do not fear, for I have redeemed you;
I have summoned you by name; you are mine.
When you pass through the waters,
I will be with you;
and when you pass through the rivers,
they will not sweep over you.
When you walk through the fire,
you will not be burned;
the flames will not set you ablaze.’