

There is a contest which is taken incredibly seriously by some, with commitment and energy devoted to gaining the reward of success and adulation when all is achieved. It is happening as I speak. It is the 'guess which topical reference the preacher will use to start today's sermon' competition. It has a second phase: 'having started like that, how on earth will it be related to anything to do with God?' For those players eagerly awaiting today's piece of topicality, I will not disappoint and will start, as I have to, with this summer of sport.

It's very easy to forget that, not so long ago, we had to be content with a very few achievers. Now, apart from football (and I've given up on that on principle, and that's a whole other sermon) we are really very good indeed at quite a lot. Athletics, Women's rugby, cricket. There are heroes and role models all over. So that leads to the key question, How is he going to relate sporting success to God?

Actually, by thinking about the people who have not, to use those two wonderful new verbs, 'medalled' or 'podiumed'. Most athletes don't do well. Most lose. Only a few win. All gibe their everything, but the media spotlight likes success above everything, and sterling efforts, even the making of the final (or 'finalling' I suppose) are not enough. There was a wonderful cartoon in the paper this week of a teenager holding his GCSE results and saying to his parents, 'Put it this way. At least it was a personal best'.

If you were to hand out medals to Apostles there would be some obvious contenders. Peter, James and John formed an inner group of the Twelve. Thomas fails, or succeeds, heroically. Philip has quite a role in the book of Acts. Andrew puts in some good performances: I'm sure his brother Peter would give him due credit in the post race interview. (I do love those interviews. I count the number of times athletes say 'unbelievable', and marvel at the desperate situations interviewers get themselves in. As one writer put it, if one of them were interviewing the Almighty the question would be: 'God, you've just made the world in six days. How proud do you feel?'). Judas Iscariot we know about. But what about James the son of Alphaeus, Simon the Cananean, or Bartholomew?

Bartholomew is so vague that we are not even sure if he was the same person as Nathanael, the one whose cynicism about Nazareth meant he wasn't sure about Jesus as the Messiah, but followed Christ and was present at the Sea of Galilee after the resurrection. Bartholomew is so obscure that even when you spell his name right it just looks wrong. He's an also ran. And yet we honour him with a red letter day just like Peter and Andrew, James and John. I think we do this not because all sorts of further beliefs about Bartholomew have grown up: that he died in a gruesome fashion in Azerbaijan and is depicted in art in a pretty horrible way which will put you off your coffee if I tell you (but Google his statue in the cathedral in Milan and you'll see what I mean); nor that Canterbury Cathedral is said to be the last resting place for one of his arms.

We venerate him because he was there, because he was recorded as being one of Christ's followers, because he was one of the twelve, because he accompanied his fellow disciple (in the Synoptic Gospels it's always Philip) when they went out in twos, because he witnessed the resurrection and received the Spirit and spread the Gospel. I hope you felt just a little uncomfortable when I talked about awarding medals to the Apostles, because that's not

what they thought they were about. They were following Christ because they could do nothing else. Some of them had a prominent role in certain events. But all were essential, because all were called, and all could do nothing else but follow, giving all that they had to do so.

Those who don't get the best seats and the prominent roles and the media coverage can take heart from Bartholomew. It is not prominence and importance and adulation and honour to which we are called. We are called to serve, to witness, to be the presence of Christ in the world. We are called to take part, because to take part is to win. All will receive a crown, and those whose service is hidden rather than prominent will receive the same reward. It's interesting that Bartholomew has become associated with the ministry of healing – think of the hospitals dedicated to him. It's a historical accident, as some of his relics were venerated in a church in Rome which then took over an old pagan medical centre. It's not then because Bartholomew was a gifted healer: the ministry of healing is a gift to the whole church and Bartholomew is as much connected with it as we are. It is God who is great. It is Christ who saves. It is we who follow.

The most gracious sportsmen and women recognise that success and prominence is the result of vast amounts of their own faithful and hidden work, and even more to do with the teamwork of all sorts of people who will never see the limelight. In the mid 1990s British Cycling was a week away from complete disaster and bankruptcy. All sorts of people then worked to enable Chris Hoy and Bradley Wiggins and Nicole Cooke and Victoria Pendleton to achieve what they have, starting with the person who redesigned the system from scratch. Some Christians will occupy pulpits like this, wear fine clothes, write brilliant books, do great deeds. Some will be like Bartholomew. In practical terms, we need each other. Spiritually, all are called to follow, and in doing so, all will receive the glory, for it is given to us already in Jesus Christ. The question for each of us then is this: how can I serve? How must I follow? And where will Christ lead me?