

Didon and the Olympic Aim



The year 2012 sees the Olympic Games in Britain for the third time, having previously been there in 1908 and 1948. They are thought to have originated in 776 BC and derived from the Greek festival held at Olympia on the Peloponnese peninsula in southern Greece. This place contained the sanctuary of Zeus, the greatest of the Greek gods who was primarily that of the sky and was worshipped on mountain tops. About 100 miles to Olympia's east is Athens, and halfway between lies ancient Corinth. Hence it must have been familiar territory to the Apostle Paul.

The Games continued until the end of the 4th century AD when the Roman Emperor Theodosius I closed down various pagan sites and issued the decree that effectively made Christianity the official state religion of the Roman Empire. Fifteen hundred years then elapsed before the Games were resurrected in Athens in 1896. In the modern era since then they have been held every four years except during the World Wars.

Today the Games have three distinctive features: the Olympic Flame, the Insignia, and the Motto under which athletes compete. The flame is lit by the sun's rays in Olympia and burns in memory of the Games' ancient origin. It is noteworthy that BBC News reported on 10 May this year that the flame 'was kindled by actress Ino Menegaki, playing a high priestess, who caught the sun's rays in a parabolic mirror. The flame went out briefly before being re-lit and transferred to the first torchbearer. The ceremony took place amid the Temple of Hera ruins, by the ancient Olympic Games stadium'. The flame was then transferred to Britain to be run around the whole of the Isles.

The Insignia are twofold. First are five coloured rings representing the five continents. Then there's the 2012 logo crafted by Wolff Olins.

This emblem has received an amount of criticism. Some say it aims 'to appeal to today's Internet generation'; Iran threatens to boycott the Games because it spells out the word Zion; still others see in it satanic symbolism. Certainly it's different to the 1948 publicity having Big Ben in the background!

In 1884 the Games adopted the Motto 'CITIUS - ALTIUS - FORTIUS' translating as 'Faster - Higher - Stronger'. It was proposed by Pierre de Coubertin, the International Olympic Committee founder, who borrowed it from his friend Henri Didon, a Dominican priest. In principle it encourages athletes to strive to do their best.

'The most important thing in life is not the triumph, but the fight; the essential thing is not to have won, but to have fought well.'

Did Henri Didon originate this principle? In fact readers are correct if they think it sounds familiarly biblical. Just consider these words.

'Know ye not that they which run in a race run all, but one receiveth the prize? So run, that ye may obtain.'

So the original idea is found in Paul's Epistle which shows there is more to it than just fighting well. The letter continues with,

'And every man that striveth for the mastery is temperate in all things. Now they do it to obtain a corruptible crown; but we an incorruptible. I therefore so run, not as uncertainly; so fight I, not as one that beateth the air: But I keep under my body, and bring it into subjection: lest that by any means, when I have preached to others, I myself should be a castaway'.

1 Corinthians ch.9 vv 24-27

The fact that Paul the Apostle travelled in the vicinity of the original Olympics and would quite probably be aware of them, could well account for him using terminology that the people of nearby Corinth would be familiar with when he was writing to them.

Lastly, those watching the games are witnesses to the events. This is where the writer to the Hebrews brings together the race we run, the witnesses and He who oversees it all.

'Wherefore seeing we also are compassed about with so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which doth so easily beset us, and let us run with patience the race that is set before us, Looking unto Jesus the author and finisher of our faith; who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is set down at the right hand of the throne of God.'

Hebrews ch.12 vv 1-2
