

Plymouth Unitarian Church

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Finishing the Race

Opening video/music

Ode to Zeus from CANTO OLYMPICO (Instrumental) YOUTUBE 3:42M

Welcome + Introduction

Welcome to everyone, both here in church and joining us online.

The theme of today's service is sport and religion. It was written by Steve, who, as many of you know, prefers to write services rather than lead them, so today's reflections will be shared by members of the congregation.

The service is presented in three parts and includes readings, hymns, music, and several short video clips.

But we begin, as always with the lighting of our chalice as a symbol of our free religious faith.

Chalice is light

Our opening music was Ode to Zeus from CANTO OLYMPICO, a classical-style poem praising Zeus, the chief god in Greek mythology.

CANTO OLYMPICO means Olympic song or chant, and is a celebratory hymn connected to Mount Olympus, the home of the Greek gods.

Opening words

We have two lots of opening words – both are from the New Testament.

The first are from 1 Timothy Chapter 4 Verse 8 – the Good News Bible version.

Physical exercise has some value, but spiritual exercise is valuable in every way, because it promises life both for the present and for the future.

The second are from 2 Timothy Chapter 4 Verse 7 from the New International Version.

These words inspired the title for today's service.

I have fought the good fight; I have finished the race. I have kept the faith.

These passages inspire believers to run their spiritual race with purpose, discipline, and hope.

Like an athlete training for a sporting event, they should compete honourably, and finish well.

Hymn ONE

Our first hymn is number 280 from the Green Hymn Book – Morning has Broken.

This hymn, first published in 1931 was made famous by the folk singer Cat Stevens, now called Yusuf Islam.

Steve chose this hymn as he hates morning people with a passion.

He knows several who are up at the crack of dawn, in the gym at six AM, full of energy; others who are out running at daybreak come rain or shine.

This hymn is a salute to them as Steve says they are better people than he will ever be.

Part A

Religion and sport have long been intertwined, sharing many parallels.

Both are rooted in ritual, community, a sense of identity, and the pursuit of meaning.

Although they are often seen as distinct spheres – religion as sacred and sports as secular – they function in strikingly similar ways within society.

Religions offer doctrine, moral codes, and rituals that guide our lives.

Sports, too, have rules, codes of conduct, and long-standing traditions.

In both, participation involves a commitment to shared principles.

Rituals are especially important in each. We can often recognise someone's religion by their attire – much like football fans.

Supporters wear distinctive team colours to identify one other: replica shirts, scarves, hoodies and hats.

Both religion and sport feature songs, chants or anthems, along with the sharing of food and drink.

We gather in central places: a church, a synagogue, a mosque – or a football stadium - the sacred space where the beautiful game is played.

Sports stars can take on an almost sacred status; they are admired, emulated, and adored in ways similar to religious figures.

In both there is a strong sense of belonging and continuity, reinforcing identity within a community.

The celebration of both religion and sports often feel similar in atmosphere.

It can be an emotionally charged experience - unifying, and deeply meaningful.

The individual becomes part of something larger than themselves, sharing in collective joy, disappointment, and hope.

For some people, especially in more secular societies, sport has filled the social and emotional space that religion once held.

Have you ever witnessed a moment of peak sporting performance or a dramatic victory? The language used to describe it is often almost religious.

Yet the passion that both religion and sport can inspire can also turn darker.

At times, the intensity – and even the violence – they can generate is striking, and at moments, deeply unsettling.

A positive example is the World Cup. In Britain, we unite behind a national team – perhaps the only greater unifying force being our collective response in times of national tragedy, such as war, terrorism, or natural disaster.

There is the shared thrill of competition, the hope of reaching the finals, the deafening roars that ripple through neighbourhoods when a goal is scored, and people pouring into the streets in celebration.

And then of course – often – the agony of defeat, with grown men reduced to tears.

Yet, even then, we continue to see the players as heroes; we still love and admire them.

We should always have hope. England will win the World Cup again one day.

Statistically, though, it's more likely the England women's national football team will achieve glory first.

At the other end of the spectrum lies the hostility that can arise between opposing fans, sometimes spilling over into hooliganism and violence.

Steve recalls being caught up in such an atmosphere while working in Newcastle Upon Tyne.

He was at the central train station on the day of a match between arch-rivals Newcastle United and Sunderland.

As Sunderland fans arrived at the station and Newcastle supporters converged from nearby metro stops, then tension in the air was palpable.

The scale of the police presence was striking. Officers on horseback outside the station, and inside, an army of men and women in full riot gear.

It created a strange, deeply unsettling atmosphere.

In Scotland, the sectarian rivalry between the Rangers FC and Celtic FC runs deep.

Similarly, in Spain, the intense competition between Real Madrid and FC Barcelona is often tied to broader political tensions, particularly those surrounding Catalan independence and Spanish unionism.

Many Scottish and Welsh supporters do not support England at major sporting events such as the World Cup.

When asked which teams they support, many Scottish fans reply with A.B.E - Anyone but England.

You can even buy t-shirts with Anyone but England on them. Steve saw them in an Edinburgh gift shop.

In response, some England fans created t-shirts for the Scottish fans with the logo S.N.P. and the words Scotland not Playing on.

Nicola Sturgeon, the former First Minister of Scotland and leader of the Scottish National Party is aware of this appalling attitude, and in response, always wishes England teams good luck on her social media platforms and congratulates them when they win.

It many ways, these rivalries mirror the hostility that can exist between different religious denominations or sects. Them and us.

Perhaps this tendency is rooted in something fundamental within us – an echo of our more primitive nature.

The instinct to belong to a clan or group is closely tied to survival, shaping how we form identities and alliances.

In summary, both religion and sport play powerful roles in shaping behaviour, identity, and meaning in people's lives.

They both fulfil a deep human desire for connection, purpose, and even a sense of transcendence beyond the ordinary – especially in the context of the challenges many people face in their daily lives.

Before we continue, we will watch a short video clip about the Church of Maradona.

The Maradonian Church or in Spanish IGLESIA MARADONIANA is a religion created by fans of the late Argentinian footballer Diego Maradona.

Its followers believe he is the greatest player of all time, and the church was founded in the late 1990s.

It even has its own Ten Commandments. These include declaring unconditional love for Diego and for the beauty of football, adopting Diego as your middle name, and naming your first son Diego.

CHURCH OF MARADONA baptises its first baby in Mexico - YOUTUBE 1:27 M

Hymn TWO

Our second hymn is number 128 from the Purple Hymn Book – Our World is One World.

Steve chose this hymn as it symbolises the unifying force of sports for humanity.

Prayer

We now have two sports prayers that Steve found on a Jesuit website.

One is a Prayer for Athletes, and one is a Prayer of Competition.

It mentions God and the words Father in the prayers which might make some of you uncomfortable.

The Athlete's Prayer.

God, let me play well but fairly.

Help me to learn something that matters once the game is over.

Let competition make me strong but never hostile.

Always let me help my opponent up. Never catch me rejoicing in the adversity of others.

If I know victory, allow me to be happy.

If I am denied, keep me from envy.

Remind me that sports are just games. If through athletics I set an example, let it be a good one.

And our second prayer is the Prayer of Competition.

Prayer of Competition

Dear Father.

May we compete with Your heart shining through ours. May we push ourselves to be what You tell us we can be.

May we have kindness in our hearts, mindfulness in our souls, and endurance to finish.

Keep us and our competitors safe from harm and let our actions be a testament to Your glory.

Amen

Video clip

Instead of a reading we now have a short video clip for you to watch called:

This is why you should NEVER give up! The LASSE VIREN story
YOUTUBE 2.26M

(After the clip read this)

It is a matter of will. When you don't know what is coming, hope is all you have.

If you fall, don't give up - get up and keep on running – it might work out better than you think

Part B

The origins of sport are closely linked to religious festivals.

Perhaps the most notable example is the original Olympic games, held every four years in honour of the Greek pantheon of gods, particularly their chief deity, Zeus.

These games began around the eighth century BCE and continued until the fourth century CE.

Although the modern Olympic games are secular in nature, the ancient Olympics combined athletic competition with sacred ceremony.

Participants gathered at Olympia, a major sanctuary dedicated to Zeus, which was filled with temples and altars.

The site was also home to the famous statue of Zeus at Olympia, one of Seven Wonders of the Ancient World.

Participants swore an oath to Zeus, known as the ZEUS HORKIOS. Breaking this oath was believed to incur the displeasure of the gods.

Sacred rituals formed an important part of the festival, including the sacrifice of one hundred oxen in honour of Zeus – a ceremony known as a hecatomb.

The Olympic games were both a religious pilgrimage and a festival.

As a result, an Olympic truce, called the EKECHEIRIA, was declared during the games, and warring city-states were expected to observe this temporary suspension of hostilities.

Victory at the ancient Olympic games was considered a sign of divine favour.

Only freeborn Greek men were permitted to compete, and athletes participated nude as part of the Greek celebration of physical beauty and excellence.

Events included foot races, the pentathlon, boxing, wrestling, equestrian contests, and pankration – a brutal combat sport combining elements of boxing and wrestling.

Married women were strictly forbidden from attending the games, although unmarried women and priestesses were allowed to watch.

The Olympics formed part of the Panhellenic games, a series of four major religious and athletic festivals. The other three were the Pythian, Nemean, and Isthmian games, held in honour of gods including Zeus, Apollo, and Poseidon.

There was also a separate athletic festival for unmarried women known as the HERAEAN games, held in honour of the goddess Hera.

Sports is not portrayed in the Bible as organised competition in the same way as ancient Greece.

However, both the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament contain references to physical contests, athletic activity, and, most notably in the New Testament, sporting metaphors used to illustrate spiritual truths.

These included our opening words. I have fought the good fight; I have finished the race. I have kept the faith.

In the Hebrew Bible, physical strength and competition are most often associated with warfare.

The great athletes of the biblical world would have been warriors and soldiers, and the scriptures are filled with stories celebrating their courage, skill, and victory.

These warriors were trained in hand-to-hand combat and the use of swords, while also becoming highly skilled horsemen, and archers.

The greatest warrior of the Israelites was Samson. His extraordinary physical strength reflects a broader cultural admiration for the powerful

and idealised body, with physical prowess often seen as a sign of divine favour.

In many ways, Samson can be viewed as the Israelite equivalent of Hercules - the flawed strongman who ultimately destroys himself in order to defeat his enemies.

Another enduring biblical story with clear sporting parallels is that of David and Goliath; the classic tale of the underdog overcoming the seemingly unbeatable favourite.

In Genesis Chapter 32 Verses 24 to 32, there is also the account of Jacob wrestling with God – a literal physical struggle that carries deep spiritual meaning.

It is in the world of the New Testament, however, that organised competitive sport becomes more visible, reflecting the influence of the Greco-Roman world.

In the second century BCE, shortly before the New Testament period, Alexander the Great conquered the region, and spread Hellenistic, or Greek, culture throughout his empire as a unifying force.

After his death, the empire fragmented, with power divided mainly between two ruling dynasties; the PTOLEMIES, based in Egypt, and the SELEUCIDS, who rule from Syria.

Jerusalem fell within the Seleucid sphere of influence, and Hellenistic culture was actively promoted and adopted by sections of the ruling elite.

The apocryphal biblical book of 2 Maccabees Chapter four Verses 12 to 14 describes the construction of a gymnasium in Jerusalem.

The most distinguished young men were encouraged to wear the traditional Greek hat, and activities such as wrestling and discus throwing became increasingly popular.

This gymnasium was far more than a sports centre. It served as a place for physical training, athletic competition, education, and elite male social life.

However, this institution conflicted with traditional Jewish religious practices, particularly because of the nudity associated with Greek athletics.

The word gymnasium itself derives from the Greek word GYMNOS, meaning naked.

In Greek culture, the naked male athletic form was celebrated as a tribute to the gods and to physical perfection.

For many Jews, however, this was viewed as shameful and deeply offensive.

As a result, the gymnasium in Jerusalem became one of the flashpoints that contributed to the Maccabean Revolt of 167 BCE, which eventually led to a period of Jewish independence before the region later fell under Roman rule.

The legacy of the Maccabees – the word means hammer in Hebrew - can still be seen today.

Many Jewish and Israeli sports clubs, particularly basketball and football teams, use the name Maccabi in honour of the revolt.

One well known example is Maccabi Tel Aviv FC.

There is also an international sporting event known as the Maccabiah Games, often referred to as the Jewish Olympics. Held every four years, the games bring together Jewish athletes from around the world to compete in a wide range of sports.

By the time of the New Testament, Rome had become the dominant superpower of the Mediterranean world.

Herod the Great ruled Judea as Rome's client king. Renowned as a master builder and skilled political ally of the Roman Empire, he

constructed the Roman-style coastal capital of Caesarea Maritima between 22 to 10 BCE.

The city was designed as a showcase of Roman imperial grandeur and loyalty to Rome.

To celebrate and dedicate the city, Herod established competitive sporting festivals intended to rival the Olympic games.

Caesarea also featured a hippodrome – the word literally means a horse course – where chariot racing took place, much like the famous races depicted in the 1959 film Ben Hur.

The city would also have hosted gladiatorial contests, including combat between men as well as spectacles involving wild animals.

These staged hunting displays, pitted exotic beasts against trained fighters.

Animals such as lions, bears, and even elephants were imported for these spectacles, with the most exotic and ferocious attracting the greatest attention.

Lions were especially popular because they symbolised strength and danger. Such imagery often recalls the stories of early Christians facing execution in the Roman arena.

These sporting events were intended both to entertain visiting Roman dignitaries and to impress the elite of Herod's kingdom.

Many Jews, however, would have avoided such events, viewing them as morally corrupt and closely connected to pagan worship and Roman imperial culture.

The Roman-Jewish historian Josephus also referred to the possibility of a hippodrome in Jerusalem, although, there is no definite archaeological or historical evidence to confirm its existence.

Herod was not only a patron of local games but also an active supporter of international athletic festivals.

In 12 BCE, he reportedly provided financial assistance to the Olympic games when they were in danger of suspension because of financial difficulties.

His support helped ensure the continuation of the festival, although it almost certainly also served to enhance his own prestige within the Roman world.

In recognition of his patronage, Herod was granted the title of - president or organiser of the games – for life.

It was, in many ways, an early form of political public relations.

Although Herod is portrayed negatively in the Bible, he remains one of the most fascinating and remarkable figures of the ancient world.

A brilliant politician, ambitious builder, and a deeply complex ruler – he is Steve's favourite biblical baddie.

Interlude

We now have a piece of music for you to listen to which will then be followed by our third and final hymn.

You'll Never Walk Alone (Cello) by James McGonigle YOUTUBE 1:49M.

It's more than a football anthem; it is song about standing together through both triumph and adversity.

Hymn THREE

Our third hymn is number 158 from the Purple Hymn Book - The flame of truth is kindled

Steve chose this hymn as the flame of truth is a link to the Olympic flame, a symbol of the Olympic movement – one of peace and friendship between nations.

Part C

The final part of the service explores sports and religion in the modern era, spanning from the mid-nineteenth century to the present day.

This period was shaped by the Industrial Revolution and the migration of large numbers of young men from the countryside into rapidly growing cities to work in factories.

It was during this time that the YMCA - The Young Man's Christian Association - was founded.

Established in London in 1844 by George Williams and later immortalised in the iconic 1978 disco anthem by the Village People, the YMCA was created to improve the spiritual and moral condition of young working-class men and to protect them from the perceived temptations of urban life.

Entertainment and leisure in this era were heavily influenced by class, wealth, and religion.

Among many reformers, the chief concerns were gambling, prostitution, excessive drinking, and even the use of drugs such as opium.

For many young men, the public house was the centre of recreation and social life, where heavy drinking was commonplace.

The YMCA provided wholesome recreational activities, fellowship, moral guidance, and safe affordable accommodation for young men who had migrated to the cities to work.

It promoted discipline, sobriety, and self-improvement, encouraging the development of a healthy body, mind, and spirit.

These ideals became closely associated with a new movement known as Muscular Christianity, a Protestant movement that emerged from the social and cultural attitudes of the period.

It was influenced by Britain's position as the dominant global power of the age, as well as contemporary ideas surrounding Darwinism, evolution, and the survival of the fittest.

Muscular Christianity linked physical strength and moral character with religious purpose.

The movement encouraged men towards service and mission, inspired by the belief that they all may be one.

Its influence could even be seen in the literature of the period, most famously in Tom Brown's School Days, which celebrated the virtues of teamwork, courage, discipline, and Christian morality through sport.

In many ways, sport became a force that helped unite the British Empire.

In Victorian Britain, gyms were not always regarded as wholesome places, and sports such as boxing were often associated with gambling and violence.

The brutal world of bare-knuckle boxing in 1880s London is vividly portrayed in the television series A Thousand Blows.

In response to this culture, the YMCA sought to provide a morally clean and disciplined sporting environment.

Sport was encouraged not simply for physical fitness, but as a means of building character, self-control, and Christian fellowship.

This influence can still be seen today in two globally popular sports that were created through the YMCA movement.

Basketball was invented in 1891 by Doctor James Naismith at the YMCA international training school in Springfield, Massachusetts. It was designed as an indoor sport that could be played during winter and involve less physical injury than many existing games.

Similarly, volleyball was invented in 1895 by William G. Morgan, also within the YMCA. It was created as a less vigorous sport, better suited to older YMCA members while still promoting exercise, teamwork, and recreation.

Several well-known football clubs emerged during this period of Muscular Christianity.

These included Everton, Manchester City, Southampton, and Aston Villa, all of which were founded by churches.

Southampton FC's nickname, The Saints, reflects these religious origins.

In Scotland, Celtic was established by the Catholic St Mary's Church Hall in Glasgow.

By providing organised physical activity for young men, these clubs aimed to reduce gang violence and alcoholism, while also addressing the frustrations caused by high levels of youth unemployment.

The modern Olympic Games were revived at the end of the nineteenth-century, with the first modern Games taking place in Athens, Greece, in 1896.

The first Winter Olympics were later held in Chamonix, France, in 1924.

Unlike the ancient Games, the modern Olympics were more international and secular in nature, with the honour of hosting rotating between different cities from around the world.

One of the most famous stories of a Christian athlete at the Olympics is that of Eric Liddell.

A Scottish sprinter and devoted Christian, he was born in China to missionary parents.

At the 1924 Olympics in Paris, he refused to compete in the 100 metres because the race was scheduled for a Sunday. Instead, he entered the 400 metres and went on to win the gold medal.

After the Olympics, Liddell returned to China as a missionary teacher, choosing his faith above sporting fame.

During the Second World War, he was interned by the Japanese and died in 1945 at the age of 43.

His life became an enduring symbol of conviction, discipline, and unwavering Christian faith, later inspiring the acclaimed film *Chariots of Fire*.

Do you remember Jonathan Edwards, the British former triple jumper? He is widely regarded as one of the greatest triple-jumpers in history.

The son of a vicar and a committed Christian during much of his athletic career, Edwards at one stage also refused to compete on Sundays because of his faith.

Following his retirement from athletics, Edwards presented the television programme *Songs of Praise* until 2007.

However, over time his religious views changed, and he has since described himself as agnostic, practically an atheist.

Changing societies, modern values, technological advances, and globalisation mean that both sport and religion continue to evolve.

They can unite humanity through shared identity, tradition, passion, and community, while also creating division through rivalry, belief, and politics.

Together, sport and religion reflect humanity's continuing search for meaning, belonging, and connection.

Thank you for listening

Closing words

Instead of closing words, we have some film recommendations that combine sports with themes of faith, courage, perseverance, and inspiration.

There are too many to mention them all, but here are a few favourites.

First is Chariots of Fire made in 1981, the story of two athletes competing for gold at the 1924 Paris Olympics.

It is a moving tale of faith, conviction, and overcoming prejudice, accompanied with a memorable soundtrack. Our closing music is taken from this film.

Then there is Invictus, the 2009 film which tells the inspiring story of how Nelson Mandela used rugby to unite post-apartheid South Africa and heal a deeply divided nation.

Another recommendation is The Boys in the Boat; a powerful and uplifting film about an American rowing team striving for gold at the 1936 Olympics in Hitler's Berlin.

Other notable films include Bend it Like Beckham, the story of an 18-year-old British Punjabi Sikh girl determined to pursue her passion for football, despite her traditional parent's concerns.

And of course, everyone enjoys a classic underdog story – films such as The Karate Kid, and Rocky continue to inspire audiences with their themes of resilience, determination, and triumph over adversity.

Chalice is extinguished

Closing music

Chariots of Fire – piano cover by Francesco Parrino – YOUTUBE 3.13M

Notices

Coffee/Tea