

“Persevere!”

Since our Lectionary Epistle Reading from the Letter to the Hebrews is clearly about the Race of Faith and since we are in the middle of when the Olympics are being held in Brazil, I thought it might be helpful to refer to an interesting story about the world’s fast man, a runner in this year’s Olympics, Usain Bolt of Trelawney, Jamaica, who won gold medals during the last two Olympics. The Associated Press filed a report by Jenna Fryer with the title, “Usain Bolt tells parents he’s ready to race on Sunday”. Quoting from the article, “His parents paid him a brief visit in the athletes’ village and insisted Friday he’s ready to run and defend his gold medals.

Wellesley and Jennifer Bolt both inquired about their son’s health in their Thursday night visit with the sprinter. Bolt pulled out of his national championships last month because of the hamstring injury, but has insisted he’s fine to compete in Brazil.

‘He said, ‘Mom, if I wasn’t ready, I wouldn’t be here because I’m not into the losing thing. I’m ready,’ said Jennifer Bolt.

Bolt is trying to win the 100, 200 and 4x100 relay - just like the last two Olympics - to close his career with nine gold medals. The 100-meter final is Sunday and Bolt races in his first heat the day before.

The Bolts spoke to a small group of reporters during a news conference, giving anecdotes from Bolt’s childhood and discussing his rise into a global superstar.

Although he was born roughly 10 days past his due date – ‘the only time in his life he was slow,’ she said – he’s been fast ever since. She recognized he might be special just three weeks after his birth when he nearly fell off a bed and she noticed him trying to push himself up.

‘I thought ‘What kind of a child is this? Three weeks old and he’s pushing!’ she said.

He was off and running from there, just like both of his parents. He once had to sprint home from school to collect his forgotten lunch and by 10, he could beat his mother in a race. Two years later, they knew for certain they had an athlete on their hands.

‘At the age of 12, being in primary school, he started to compete in school sports and he was always on top and he was always beating his classmates,’ she recalled. ‘From then, we noticed he would be a great athlete.’

He may have inherited his speed from his parents - and father Wellesley took credit Friday for Bolt’s dance moves - but the sprinter is a far bigger entertainer. ...

Since their son became a star, Trelawney now has running water, a paved road, refurbished clinics, health centers and schools and a new playground for kids.

Wellesley still reports for work at the village shop, where he sells as much as he gives away.

‘It’s something to occupy my time so I don’t get lazy,’ he said. ‘As parents, we are proud of him, but we don’t think it is fair of us to be acting over the head of the rest of the community. So I operate the shop mainly to give away what we have.’ ...

She said she has seen no change in her son as his stardom grows. From his debut in the 2002 junior world championships, Jennifer insisted Bolt is still the good child who listens to his parents.

The one thing that did grow, though, was Bolt’s love of the spotlight. Although Wellesley characterized him as ‘playful at home,’ it wasn’t until Bolt took the world stage in Beijing that he realized how much entertainment he could give a crowd.

‘In Beijing, he started doing all these things and realized people really liked it,’ Wellesley said. ‘That’s when he became an entertainer.’

Bolt, who turns 30 on Aug. 21, has been adamant these will be his final Olympics. His parents believe him and think he’s determined to go out a winner. ...

‘I would like him to be an ambassador to track and field because he brings fun to the sport,’ Jennifer said. ‘After he leaves, you don’t know who will take over his role. Without him, it would be really boring.’” (August 12, 2016 Associated Press report, “Usain Bolt tells parents he’s ready to race on Sunday” by Jenna Fryer)

From that article, we could determine Usain Bolt is widely recognized, just as were the many folks referred to in the first part of today’s Reading. Now, that report about Usain Bolt did not provide any information about his religious practices. One might suspect the reference to his father giving away almost as much as he sells in his shop, may well indicate the family lives according to Jesus’ agape love example. Doing a little research, I learned Usain St. Leo Bolt is a devout Roman Catholic and he was invited to speak at the 2013 Vatican Conference on Religious Liberty.

Certainly, from verses 29 through 34, the author of the Letter to the Hebrews provided us a list and description of many important examples of biblical persons, who ran the Race of Faith with perseverance!

I suspect, the author brought the list up to New Testament times, as he wrote in **verse 35**, ***“Through faith women received their dead relatives raised back to life.”*** Martha and Mary in the Gospel of John may have been among those women, about whom verse 35 referred. Unfortunately, many of the early disciples of Jesus suffered greatly as the rest of verses 35 through 38 attested to.

Responding to the author’s long list of persons, who had run the race of Faith, Rev. Dr. Janet H. Hunt has said, “All of these whose stories of ‘running this race of faith’ are passed along to us are far less than perfect. In fact, some of them stumble and fall in rather remarkable ways.” Hunt continued, “Perhaps it is so that these are named so that all of us – regardless of our strengths, our weaknesses, our successes, our failures, our moral stature or our moral weakness – all of us are called by God to simply get in ‘the race’ and trust that God will take care of what it means to ‘win.’ And maybe by simply being ‘in the race’ we are among those who are ‘persevering.’”

Recognizing something of the difficulties you and I might have in accepting our call to run the Race of Faith, Hunt stated, “Indeed, in a world as full of challenges as the one you and I inhabit, it might be tempting to simply turn in our ‘running shoes’ and head for home. This would seem to be especially so if we thought it was up to us to vanquish all that which causes the suffering and pain in this world which God’s people are called to address.” Hunt concluded, “But no. Along with Rahab and Gideon, Barak and Samson, Jephthah, and David and Samuel and all the rest? You and I are simply called to ‘run.’ And to keep our eyes on Jesus as we do so, trusting that Jesus will take care of the rest.” (“Running this Race” on dancingwiththeword.com by Rev. Dr. Janet H Hunt)

As we recall the many wonderful deeds God worked through that list of persons, who ran the race of Faith in Biblical times, we may become pessimistic – concerned about our ability to play a valuable role in this salvation history. Yet, the author of today’s Scripture wrote in **verses 39 and 40**, ***“What a record all of these have won by their faith! Yet they did not receive what God had promised, because God had decided on an even better plan for us. His purpose was that only in company with us would they be made perfect.”*** Yes, God’s purpose is to bring us, along with many persons of all kinds, who have or will run the Race of Faith, into the fulfilled New Faith Relationship with God, including in the Fully Revealed and Fulfilled Kingdom of God!

The author of the Letter to the Hebrews reminds us of our call to run our own Race of Faith in the midst of that great company of those, who have run the Race of faith, in the concluding two verses of our Scripture. **He wrote in 12:1**, ***“As for us, we have this large crowd of witnesses around us. So then, let us rid ourselves of everything that gets in the way ... and let us run with determination the race that lies before us.”***

The Reading then provides us the best counsel about how we are to persevere in running the Race of Faith in verse 2, ***“Let us keep our eyes fixed on Jesus, on whom our faith depends from beginning to end. He did not give up because of the cross! On the contrary, because of the joy that was waiting for him, he thought nothing of the disgrace of dying on the cross, and he is now seated at the right side of God’s throne.”*** Yes, as we run the Race of Faith – we need to trust – faith in God’s and Jesus’ Agape Love for us and, instead, of react with fear or anger because we will, at times, also suffer, we are to look to the example of our Savior, Jesus Christ, because he did not allow the fear of death or death itself to stop his faithing in our Divine Parent’s Agape Love! Let’s not seek to tough it out on our own but to depend on God and to follow the example of God’s Son, Jesus Christ. **Persevere in the Race of Faith!** Amen.