

November 21 & 22, 2009
“Christ The King”
Paul Johnson

If we're of a certain age, we know this movie. If we're not of a certain age, then we ought to watch it sometime because it's a great movie. It's called "Chariots of Fire." It's partly about a runner named Harold Abrahams—a Jewish man who overcomes anti-Semitism to represent Great Britain in the Olympics; and partly about another British runner named Eric Liddell who won the 400 meter dash in the 1924 Paris Olympics in world record time.

Eric Liddell was a Scot; and the child of Christian missionaries. He was born in China, and his vocation was to do missionary service in China, which he eventually did. But he was also a gifted athlete, and particularly fast...fast enough to make the British Olympic Team in the 100 meter dash.

Now a conflict in this movie is that the qualifying heat for the 100 meter dash is on a Sunday, and Liddell is convicted that it is not right for a faithful disciple to run on the Sabbath. The Sabbath is to give glory to God, not human beings. So to the consternation of a lot of very powerful British people, he decides to not run.

Now his confrontation with the civil authority about his decision probably did not take place exactly the way it's portrayed in the movie because actually, Liddell knew three months ahead of time—three months before the Olympics began—that the 100 meter qualifiers would be held on a Sunday. To make a dramatic point, the movie presents Liddell as finding out about this conflict on the boat to France. But really, he knew about the schedule much earlier, and much earlier made his decision to change events from the 100 meter dash to the 400 meter dash.

This cinematic inconsistency, of course, does not change the importance of two things about his story: First, it doesn't change the price he paid for switching from the 100 to the 400, which is a completely different kind of race and one that he had never excelled in. It was a decision that could cost him. He was the favorite in the 100, but a footnote among any list of 400 runners. He moved from being a likely champion to being an also-ran. There was still a price to pay in his achievement and reputation for choosing Christ rather than his own glory or the glory of his nation.

Secondly, it does not change the impact his decision had on those who watched him.

There have been thousands of gold medal winners over the years. But Liddell's story—like that of Jesse Owens in 1936; or the Hungarian Water Polo Team in 1956; or the American Hockey Team in 1980—is one that captures our imagination because it represents something beyond athletic excellence.

His decision--to change for the sake of his faith from a race in which he was favored to a race in which most gave him little chance to succeed—touched others. The decision, of course, was criticized by many. If it didn't happen exactly the way it's depicted in the movie, there were certainly persons who responded to Liddell's decision with a "what is he thinking?" or an "it's every Englishman's duty to serve the crown."

But his decision to honor God rather than himself or his nation, even then inspired others. The scene in the movie where an opposing runner gives him a piece of paper with a scripture passage on it before the big race is true. People who otherwise wouldn't have encouraged him—including his competitors--did so because of the decision he had made. Others found strength, and hope, and righteousness in his decision to stand for God, at the cost of his own glory.

Now I'm being an amateur historian here...but I think one of the reasons his story resonated so powerfully back then is because of the times in which it happened. It was 1924, just six years after the end of a European war so hideous that it left in ruins almost every private life and every public institution in the continent...including the Church. Christian kings named Wilhelm; and Nicholas; and Franz Joseph; and George; and Christian heads of governments--had started that war, each one of them hoping to beat the other guy and win. Clergy and people had greeted the outbreak of war with cheers rather than tears, and prayed not for peace but for victory against the enemy. From 1914 to 1918, millions of Christians proved to the world that they were just like everybody else. It is impossible for us to comprehend the moral and spiritual dislocation Europe experienced after the First World War. Everything that had once been worth trusting in—King; Country; Tradition; even Faith—had proven itself unable to stand against worldly values and pressures. It was a time when too many Christians did not behave as Christians.

So when one little runner took a stand for God, and took a stand against those powers and the powers of the world that seek only to give glory to themselves, and pointed in another direction, those around him took notice, and paid attention, and found in his struggle and challenge a bit of hope for themselves. It's why we tell his story, and make movies about it.

Almost 100 years after the fact, Eric Liddell is still the most popular Scottish athlete...and I don't very much think it's because he won a gold medal. I think that when the time came to choose between his own glory or the righteousness of God, he chose the righteousness of God. To some, it was a decision about whether to run or not. But to him, and those who watched him—whether they understood it this way or not—it was a decision about who his King really was.

Today is a special day of observance in the Church. It's called Christ the King Sunday, and it always falls on the last weekend before Advent begins. It is, oddly, not an ancient celebration in the history of the Church. In fact, the Roman Catholic Pope Pius XI established Christ the King as a feast day only in 1925—one year after Eric Liddell took his stand. My hunch is that in the midst of all that mess I mentioned just a moment ago, the Catholic Bishop of Rome decided it was time to remind everybody of who the real King is. And assuming that even popes read the sports page, it also raises the intriguing possibility of just how influential Eric Liddell's decision may have been.

It's Christ the King Sunday--a day when we are intended to be reminded of whose authority we are under, and who our King really is...

There have been governments throughout history who have insisted that Christians decide between Jesus and the civil authority.

We do not live in a land such as that. But, of course, neither did Eric Liddell. It wasn't so much the King of England or the Prince of Wales he stood against; and he wasn't violating the civil law. It was, more, the culture which surrounded him that he stood against; which would have preferred that he be no different than they are, and follow the same rules as they did.

The problem being that disciples don't have the same set of rules that everybody else does. Our rules are different, because our King is different.

The story today—this brief snippet from the Passion of Christ as told in John—points that out. It's hard to miss the symbolism. Jesus is called King of the Jews, and he stands before a representative of the Emperor of Rome.

Two Kings. One of them represents the powers of oppression, violence, and force. Pilate represents the most advanced legal system of the time, yet one which shows no mercy. The

other represents a kingdom beyond this world whose one mandate is “love one another, the way I have loved you.” The Emperor has subjects. In John 15, Christ the King calls us friends. The representative of one king is using his authority to put the other king on trial; and that other king reveals his nature by allowing it to happen...allowing it to happen. Kings may be killed, and they may be overthrown. But they do not allow themselves to be put on trial. But Jesus does. One king just ain't like the other; and one kingdom just ain't like the other, either.

It's a story that reveals a truth I hope we've heard more than once, and maybe even acted on...that the ways of Jesus are different than the ways of the world; and because we follow Jesus, it's his way that we follow, and his law of love that we seek to manifest in our lives. We bring not violence, but peace; revenge, but mercy; not despair, but hope; not hatred, but love; not ourselves first, nor our country first, but Christ first.

And that's not always easy. It asks that we be courageous, and let Jesus take us through our fears. It's a good life under this King, but it is not one of ease. There are truths about Jesus that comfort us. There are also truths about Jesus that challenge those of us who follow...at least, they challenge me...so that if we've never broken into a sweat because of what we believe Jesus is calling us to do or be, then there's a chance we may need to follow him a little more closely. I think it's Tony Campolo who once said that a goal for every follower of Jesus might be that at least once in our lives we get arrested for his sake...which is his way of saying that at least once, someone ought to get angry, or be outraged or offended—or at least once maybe we ought to get in trouble--because we have loved the way Jesus asks us to love.

Which brings me to the announcement made by the Vestry this past week: A huge gift has come our way. We are now one of the largest landowners in Western Henrico County. It will take a long time for us to figure out what to do with all that land because we want to do that the right way, and then it will take a long time to do whatever it is we are called to do; and what we do with it certainly won't be my decision, or the decision of any single individual. But I sure do hope we find some way to use that land that will get us in trouble for Jesus' sake, just a little bit.

The first words of the Gospel are always grace, and mercy, and love; and it sure does make life better when it's lived in relationship with Jesus. But in choosing to follow him, it does mean that we are choosing to not follow something or someone else. And while doing so may not ask of us our life; and while doing so may not even cost us the equivalent of a shot at a gold medal; we should rightly expect that it will at least sometime ask something of us; and sometimes, make us not more comfortable, but less. For I am convinced that the way we disciples end up being a blessing to the world is by following not the ways of the kings of this world, but the ways of our King. I think to be reminded of that is why not just the Roman Catholics, but all of us now observe Christ the King Sunday.

The 1924 Olympics were not the last place Eric Liddell had to choose between himself and the values of this world, and the life of faithfulness. He ran for only one more year. In 1925 he returned to China to begin his missionary work. Over the next twenty years, he left China only briefly. He was a teacher, and not surprisingly, coached athletics. He married, and he and his wife had three children—the last of whom he never met.

In 1941 he stood up to his own government for the second time in his life when the British encouraged all their nationals to leave China. He chose to stay. In 1943, the Japanese overran the city in which his mission was located. They set up a camp, and Liddell became its chief pastor...overseeing proper distribution of food; teaching; and arranging for sporting events to keep people occupied. The way he conducted himself gave hope and order in a context in

which there was little of either, and to prove that he knew the way of love, he allowed sporting events to take place in the camp on Sunday and actually refereed them because it was the only day the inmates had to have any fun. Six months before the end of the war, he died in the prison camp of a brain tumor that no one knew he had.

Recently, in conjunction with the 2008 Beijing Olympics and the 2012 London Olympics, Liddell's story was reclaimed in a new way. The Chinese people have smiled upon Liddell's memory, referring to him as the first Chinese born Olympic champion. His biography was released in Mandarin, and a Chinese-made movie about the rest of his life called "The Flying Man" is in production.

And amidst this renewed interest in Liddell, one other revelation of his life has come forward. It seems that one final time did he choose to follow Christ rather than his own desires or the wishes of those above him. On August 11, 2007 two British Olympic officials named Simon Clegg and Clive Woodward laid a wreath and Liddell's grave in a place called Weifang. Later, at lunch several city officials told them of a story that had been quietly told in Weifang for years but unknown to the rest of the world...that it seems that a prisoner exchange between the Japanese and British was initiated sometime in late 1944. Liddell, as one of the most famous British prisoners, was on the list to be released. He refused his government's invitation to be exchanged, and took himself off the list. Instead, he gave his place to a pregnant woman in the camp.

There is no outside corroboration of this story. So it may be fact, or it may be a legend. But legends never grow in a vacuum. They always reflect the character of the person around whom they spring up. Whether he did so or not is a fact lost to history, but Eric Liddell's reputation among the people of Weifang is such that they believe he acted in this way, and sixty years afterwards still tell his story.

And so it is we tell the stories of those who remember who their real King is. May it be that someday—even today—someone will tell ours.