***[St Magnus Cathedral](http://www.stmagnus.org/), Kirkwall***

Scottish Charity SCO 05322/CCL No 119086

[St Magnus Cathedral Facebook page](http://www.facebook.com/StMagnusCathedralCongregation)

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Welcome to St Magnus Cathedral this morning. It was

founded in 1137 by St Rognvald, in honour of Magnus, his

uncle. The Cathedral belongs to the people of Orkney and its

doors are open to all. If you are a visitor, we hope this order

of service will help you feel part of our worship together.

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You can find our Sunday worship

[here on Facebook](https://www.facebook.com/StMagnusCathedralCongregation/)

<https://www.facebook.com/StMagnusCathedralCongregation/>

or [on YouTube here](https://www.youtube.com/channel/UC33Y1gSZlUBz5bIKrrx2rRQ)

Join our Wednesday ZOOM meditation by signing up here. stmagnuszoom@gmail.com

Candle Lighting and opening meditation

God is here! Among us, within us, bringing Light to our lives!
We light this candle to reminds us of God's Light that can never be extinguished.

As we come together and feel the pulse of life course among us,

let us be thankful for this day and these people.

May we, gathered here in mystery and unity, share an intention to live

fully, breathing deeply into each moment, finding more love in

ourselves and each other.

May we, gathered here in struggle and power, remember to listen for

that voice still and small inside all of us that reminds us to look for

more hope, everywhere.

Jesus said, “I have come that all people may have life, and have it in

abundance.”

We gather to celebrate our religion

 We gather to wonder in the mystery of our divinity

gather to honour our shared humanity

 As we live fully, love wastefully and be all that we can be

Reading

1 Corinthians 9.24-27

You know that in a race everyone runs, but only one wins the prize. So run in such a way as to win! Athletes deny themselves all sorts of things. Every athlete in training submits to strict discipline, in order to be crowned with a wreath that will not last; but we do it for one that will last for ever.. I don’t run like one who loses sight of the finish line. I don’t fight as if I were beating the air. What I do is discipline my body and keep it under control, for fear that, after having preached to others, I myself should be disqualified.

Reflection

The image Paul uses to invoke what he thought of as the ideal Christian way of life endures to this day. What could be more topical now than an athlete's highly disciplined training schedule as he or she prepares for fame and fortune?

It seems that some things just don't change - even over two thousand years. A Greek or Roman sports champion could be as well-known in Paul's time as he or she would be today. It seems likely that the supreme sportsman of those times was the gladiator. He would have been adored by many thousands. His trainer would have treasured and pampered him on one hand, and demanded strict discipline on the other. At the peak of his career (which tended, as now, to end rather abruptly) he would have been the Lionel Messi of the amphitheatre.

The greatest prizes usually come only at equally great cost, however. That's what Paul refers to here. There is physical pain, the sacrifice of a balanced life, and the motivation-sapping boredom of doing the same thing over and over again.

Paul's vision of a "crown that will last for ever" must have been appealing to his hearers. Those who take Jesus as master and mentor will prevail in the ongoing contest against evil powers, says Paul. Theirs will be eternal joy and fulfilment. "The last enemy to be defeated is death," he writes. This is the Christian's great prize.

Paul's image is sharp, clear and relevant to any age. But what exactly is the sort of training to which he refers?

The idea of disciplined training (*askesis* in Greek) was intrinsic to the ancient world. The word could refer to athletics, to the clearing of the mind for philosophical debate, and to religious practices which purified the human spirit. The best human life was lived in the spirit of *askesis*.

So Paul was making an utterly familiar point which would have resonated with all. Some three centuries later, however, his essentially positive message had been radically changed. The *askesis* of the Christian became a calling to escape from ordinary, earthy life into a rarified spiritual realm.

The ascetic St Anthony, for example, has been revered since the fourth century by Christians as a super-athlete. His biographer wrote of him that he

... possessed a very high degree of - perfect self-control, freedom from passion - the ideal of every monk and ascetic striving for perfection. Christ, who was free from every emotional weakness and fault was his model.

This model of life persists for many Christians to this day in this peculiarly distorted form. That is, the ideal Christian is one who is *spiritually* athletic.

The "strict discipline" about which Paul writes has been more and more confined to a particular small corner of life called "holy" or "spiritual". If a Christian is to be commended, first and above all she or he must worship, pray and meditate. A good dose of these spiritual steroids, it is said, will produce a godly way of life.

Despite this emphasis on things spiritual, what increasingly makes sense today is the idea that the discipline of *askesis* operates at every level of our lives. The time has passed when we can split life into "spiritual" and "physical" parts. Life doesn't consist of the flesh and the devil on one hand, and holiness and God on the other. It consists of a whole, to which the idea of *askesis* can and should be applied.

What then does *askesis* - holy discipline in every department of life - consist of in the 21st century?

The answer can't be expressed briefly. But to give an example: How does a Christian practice *askesis* in a society which is dedicated to the ruthless over-exploitation of natural resources? One response is the difficult *askesis* of living as simply as possible.

Such a life may appear foolish to a consumer society. An ascetic person may be mocked. To deliberately consume as little as possible in one's circumstances may even feared as a threat to established ways. But it is closer, I think, to the pioneer Jesus who lived a simple life than to the fantasy Christ who is regarded as special because he prayed, meditated, fasted, performed miracles and rose from the dead.

The underlying root of *askesis*, then, is an attitude which embraces discipline in life as a whole. The true ascetic doesn't just dose up on spiritual steroids but recognises that all "spiritual" practices are merely aspects of a totality we call life. To be holy isn't to abdicate from life but to engage in every aspect of it with holy discipline.

Prayer

*May we live as those whose daily lives touch others with encouragement and healing.*

*We pray for those whose caring hands touch the lives of the diseased; caring for lepers and cancer sufferers, those with aids or tuberculosis, and for the victims of Covid.*

*We pray for those positive people who bring light into grey situations: staff in children’s hospitals or psychiatric clinics, social workers, grief counsellors, surgeons and physiotherapists.*

*And for those determined souls who are dedicated to hands-on justice and reconciliation: peace negotiators, arbitrators between workers and management, family court judges and counsellors, those who foster understanding among religions.*

*We pray for those graceful characters who turn the other cheek, go the second mile, give without seeking any reward, love when no love is returned, persist when other’s good intentions collapse, and who stretch out their hands to lovingly touch those who once most grievously wronged them.*

*May each of us be more like Jesus of Nazareth, that the gulf between our prayers and our deeds may narrow, and our touch become more discerning, sensitive and adept in all our dealings with those around us.*

Blessing

May the God you see in all the colours of creation

arouse in you a sense of awe and wonder.

May the God who is a sacred presence be real to you.

May the God who is a source of inspiration and courage

keep calling you forward.

May you stay safe in the Way of Christ, and may you be blessed by his Spirit this day and always.