

'I HAVE FOUGHT THE GOOD FIGHT'

The actual doctrine and teaching of St Paul will always, of course, remain the primary reason for studying the speeches and writings of the great Apostle and the principal fruit to be gathered from this exercise. The literary study of the Apostle, however, is also a very important as well as a very interesting aspect of that attempt to get into his mind which is necessary if we would understand what he is talking about. He speaks very largely in figures and metaphors, sometimes perforce, sometimes by choice, and it would appear to be common sense that the more accurately we can understand the basic meaning of the figures he employs the more nearly shall we be able to appreciate the exact nuances of his thought. And from the point of view of teaching in schools one of the most important kinds of figure and metaphor that St Paul uses is the metaphor taken from the sports and athletics of the day, of which the famous phrase which stands by way of title at the head of this article is perhaps the best known.

Ton agóna ton kalon êgônismai wrote St Paul in this passage (2 Tim. 4:7), and all the English, French and Spanish versions which happen to be to hand—Douay, Knox, Westminster, A.V., R.V., R.S.V., Moffat, Phillips, Wand, Bible de Jérusalem, Crampon, Osty, Pirot-Clamer, Bover-Cantera—are in substantial agreement in translating the famous passage as the Douay does :

I have fought a good fight ; I have finished my course ;
I have kept the faith

There are, however, two notable exceptions of detail : Weymouth and Wand both render *agóna* as 'contest' and Knox translates the final phrase as : 'I have redeemed my pledge.' There is sufficient difference in figure here to be worth investigating for a closer approximation to the imagination of St Paul as he wrote these words and to serve, perhaps, as an interesting jumping-off ground with a class of Secondary Modern or Grammar School boys for a 'project' on the sporting and athletic language and imagery of the Great Apostle.

The word *agôn*, on the authority of the Lexicons, undoubtedly is generic in character and so, for that matter, is the word *certamen* by which the Vulgate translates it. One must, therefore, have some justification, either in general context or in usage, for 'specifying' it to mean one particular type of contest as all our English versions do except Wand and Weymouth. In other words, before one is justified

in translating it in terms that make St Paul think of boxing or fighting one must be able to show that these were the forms of sport he had in his mind's eye when he wrote the phrase *ton agóna ton kalon égônismai*. It would be very difficult, if not quite impossible, to show this, and there are many indications elsewhere in the writings of the Apostle to suggest that *agón* for him evoked the image of the track, especially the longer races, rather than of the 'boxing-ring.' The distaste for boxing as practised in those brutal days which we should expect from him we find indicated, one might think, in the fact that he only speaks of it definitely in passages conveying advice basically negative in character or indicative of an attitude of hostility, as in the famous passage in 1 Cor. 9, which is discussed later. In all the instances where he is advising us to *positive* action, when he 'specifies' the source of his metaphor he always does so in terms of the race-track, and that holds whether he uses *stadion*, or his more normal *dromos*, or *agón* itself or its derivative, *agônizomai*. 'Every *agônizomenos*,' St Paul says in 1 Cor. 9:25, 'refraineth himself from all things,' and Spicq, commenting on this verse in the Pirot-Clamer Bible, points out rightly that while the actual translation may be kept generic the actual type of 'contestant' in St Paul's imagination as he wrote those words was the runner, not the boxer or wrestler, since these latter did exactly the opposite of 'refraining from all things,' weight being what they sought rather than the qualities that a strict training régime might produce: 'the lesson of renunciation and mortification will not be the same,' he says, 'if one sees in *agônizomenos* a wrestler or boxer, since the training system for these athletes was entirely different. Weight, in fact, was a considerable advantage to them and so they were overfed to the point that their sheer mass and stupidity became proverbial.' In fact, that very point is made in Hebrews: '. . . let us rid ourselves of all that weighs us down . . . and run . . . the race for which we are entered' (*trekômen ton . . . agóna*) as Monsignor Knox translates it. It would seem, then, and there is much more to support the thesis also, that, in this phrase to St Timothy, St Paul had definitely in mind the race, and probably the longer, 'endurance' type of race and not a fight in any sense except the purely (and additionally) metaphorical in which we might refer to a contest of any kind, athletic or other, as a 'fight' or a 'struggle' in the widest possible sense of those words. For vividness, if not mechanical accuracy, Weymouth would seem to be best: 'I have gone through the glorious contest,' instead of 'I have fought the good fight.' Scott (in the Moffat Commentary) has suggested 'I have played the game'!

The second phrase presents no difficulty: *ton dromon teteleka* is

‘ I have finished the race ’ (or, perhaps, ‘ the course,’ though that is not quite so consistent with the general Pauline use of *dromos*). The third member remains for discussion. As already noted, all our English and other versions cited are in substantial agreement that it means ‘ I have kept the faith.’ Knox, however, translating from the Vulgate *fidem servavi*, makes it ‘ I have redeemed my pledge.’ A glance at the Lexicon (or at Moulton and Milligan) will make it clear that the sense thus given to *fidem servavi* is, in the abstract, equally permissible for *tên pistin tetêrêka*. Knox’s reason for abandoning the usual interpretation is given in his *Commentary for English Readers* (vol. III, pp. 30–I, *in loc.*) : ‘ But unquestionably a false note is struck in verse 8 if we suppose that St Paul leads off with two metaphors and follows them up with a plain statement of fact ; the situation cries out for a third metaphor as a variant of the two which went before it.’ If, however, our contention that the two previous metaphors refer to the race, to the one ‘ image ’ viewed from different aspects, is true it would seem that the third metaphor should again express another aspect of the same ‘ image ’—and that is where some ‘ correlation ’ between the Scripture department, the Classics department, perhaps even the Physical Education department and the Librarian in our schools might be fruitfully invoked in the project of interesting younger readers in the writings of St Paul. Can it be objectively maintained that, at least at the time of St Paul, payment of an entry fee, returnable at least to those who ‘ finished the course,’ was demanded in the Greek Games, especially the Isthmian Games, perhaps ? My own resources are dumb ; they mention the usual requirements for the games in their earlier stages but are silent on the nagging suspicion in my own mind that I heard somewhere, sometime, that this was so and was one of the ‘ professional ’ intrusions into the Olympic system that finally led to the abandonment of the Games in the fourth century A.D. If it is so, we are left with at least a conjectural translation that fits the situation and the imagery admirably : ‘ I have lasted the distance ; I have finished the race ; I have saved my entry-fee. For the rest, there is waiting for me the victor’s crown . . . which . . . the just Judge will place on my brow on that day.’ We would there have all the stages : entering for the race with the risk of losing one’s ‘ deposit ’ (that favourite metaphor of St Paul), lasting the distance, finishing the course, thereby saving one’s deposit, preserving it intact, and awaiting now only the actual receiving of the prize in a short time, when the President of the games is ready to confer it.

This passage, of course, is only one of many in which the interest of St Paul in the sports of the day is manifest. ‘ Far from condemning sport,’ says Brunot in his *Génie Littéraire de St Paul* (*Lectio Divina* series,

p. 207), ‘ he speaks of it in his letters in a way that shows not only a detailed knowledge but also a real appreciation of it.’ It is not suggested, of course, that his language indicates any personal proficiency in this domain. It is, however, suggested that no-one could use the language of the games so aptly, so consistently, so naturally, who did not often think in such terms. It is difficult to imagine anyone, whether brought up as a strict Jew or not, who could use such terminology in the way in which St Paul used it unless he were deeply and permanently interested in the context to which the terminology properly belonged. In fact, one may add the word ‘ sympathetically,’ since we do not use naturally to express our deepest-felt emotions, especially when we believe our end is approaching and we are writing to intimate friends and pupils, a terminology used as though it were part of ourselves and still drawn from things of which we disapproved any more than from things of which we have only small, or second-hand, knowledge. St Paul even distinguishes between the things of which he approved and those of which he disapproved—but the language of which he knew, none the less—in these matters : ‘ We are become a spectacle . . .,’ he wrote to the Corinthians (I Cor. 4:9), using the word *theatron* ; ‘ the figure of this world is passing away ’ (*partagei gar to schêma*) he wrote to them (7:31), and Spicq quotes with approval Toussaint’s version of this as ‘ *le monde est une scène qui va bientôt changer de décor.*’ These were things of which he knew, yet disapproved, just as he disapproved of the things which he expressed in the words ‘ I fought the beasts at Ephesus,’ using the technical word *ethêriomachêsa*, whether we take it as a mere figure or as a literal happening (cf. 2 Tim. 4:17 ; Tit. 1:12). Even the famous ‘ asiarchs ’ have ceased to be grounds for doubting authenticity now we know them to have been the presiding geniuses at the Ephesian games or circuses where an extraordinary or miraculous escape from a *thêriomachia* may well have made them the friends of St Paul that we, otherwise unexpectedly, find them to be. So, also, when he wished to indicate the more unpleasant side of the Christian struggle he borrowed his imagery from the more unpleasant side of the pagan games : ‘ *Hupôpiazo* my body,’ he says, in I Cor. 9, using the technical word for the ‘ blows under the eyes ’ that the boxer of the day inflicted on his opponent before he ‘ led him in subjection ’ (*doulagôgô*), dragging him round the arena to the applause of the blood-thirsty crowd. In fact that sight may well be what he, or one of his close associates, had in mind in talking of the ‘ cloud of witnesses ’ as we translate it in Hebrews (12:1) ; we should rather render *perikeimenon hêmin nephos marturôn* as ‘ the spectators that surround us like a cloud ’ when we remember the terminology of two chapters earlier (10:32–3) when the writer speaks

of us Christians as being ' made a spectacle ' (*theatrizomenoi*) in our ' great and painful struggle ' (*athlêsin*).

But when he comes to the race-track St Paul is a different man ! Now he sees what Christians should do. Their life is *agôn*, *stadion* (as the name of the ' sprint ' of the time as distinct from its use as the place where this was run), *dromos*. The pagan athletes trained severely for these events—ten long and difficult months, and more, for a moment of passing glory. If they ' refrain themselves from all things ' for this, much more should the Christian for his everlasting glory. ' Train thyself in piety,' he says to Timothy (1:4, 8)—*gymnase seauton*. ' Bodily exercise (*sômatikê gymnasia*),' he continues, ' is profitable for little ; piety is profitable for all things.' What is the use of using your megaphone to summon all competitors for their respective events as ' herald ' (*kêrux*) if at the end you yourself are declared disqualified (*adokimos*) ? And it is not sufficient, of course, merely to enter for the race, or even to run in it. One must ' so run as to obtain the prize ' (*brabeion*) ; there is no use in ' getting off to a good start,' he reminds the Galatians (5:7), if we allow ourselves to be ' jostled off ' the course. ' If a man enters an athletic contest ' (*ean athlê tis*), he reminds us through Timothy (2 Tim. 2:5), ' he does not win the prize unless he competes according to the rules.' It was the function of the judge to decide all disputes ; he was *brabeus*, he awarded the *brabeion*, he kept order among the contestants—so, too, should ' the peace of Christ ' do (*brabeuetô*) in our hearts, he reminds us in Col. 3:15. Things will not always be pleasant ; we are not merely ' runners ' in training who, except for the occasional fouling by a fellow-competitor, are mostly on their own and depending on their training for their endurance and their victory. We are also opposed by positive efforts against us ; life is, indeed, a race (*dromos*), but there are times when it becomes a wrestling match (*palê*) and we must remember who and what our opponents are (Eph. 6:12). If the race demands equipment, like the race of the hoplites, then let us be properly accoutred for the event (Eph. 6:12) ; if it is the more exciting sprint which demands the minimum of impediment, then let us strip off any garment that might hold us back ; if it is the longer and more endurance-testing type of *agôn*, then let us run steadily (*trekômen*), up and down the stadium from where the *agônothêtês* sits, but keeping our eye on Him all the time, from the starting signal and point (*archêgon*) to the victorious end (*teleiôtên*), as Heb. 12:2 reminds us, ignoring what is going on behind, like all good runners, pressing forward to the Post (*kata skopon diôkô*), like Paul himself (Phil. 3:14), and to the Eternal Crown that lies beyond it.

In our day the interest in sports that pervaded the countries with

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which St Paul was acquainted is no less than it was then, and shares, in fact, many of the characteristics that St Paul knew so well. The Christian teacher,¹ lay, cleric or religious, can do no better than take a leaf out of St Paul’s own book, ‘ become all things to all men ’ like the great Apostle, and use everything he can, not omitting the greatest interest of his pupils, ‘ to win all to Christ.’

J. J. TWOMEY, C.M.

Strawberry Hill

¹ The teacher who might wish to engage his pupils on a ‘ project ’ of this kind will find much helpful material in the article ‘ Games ’ in *Smith’s Dictionary of the Bible* ; if he reads French he will receive fuller help in Spicq, *Les Épîtres Pastorales* (in the *Études Bibliques* series), Excursus VII and VIII ; s.v. ‘ Athlète ’ in Vigouroux’s *Dictionnaire de la Bible* ; in Spicq’s commentary on *I Corinthians* in the Pirot-Clamer Bible and in his *L’Image Sportive de II Cor. 4:7-9* in *Ephemerides Theologicae Lovanienses* for 1937, pp. 209-29 ; on the history of athletics he will find much useful matter in Gardiner, *Greek Athletic Sports and Festivals*, London 1910 and his *Athletics of the Ancient World*, Oxford 1930, or in Butler, *Sport in Classic Times*, London, 2nd ed., 1931.