

Gigantic welcome

Contents

- An abundant welcome
- The heritage of Christian hospitality
- Gigantic welcome – a service for all ages
- Activities for all
- Run to win – an alternative approach based on 1 Corinthians 9.24-27

Introduction

The long-awaited Olympic Games and the Paralympics are now here in London. It is a great honour to host this momentous event. The Games are primarily a festival of sport, but we should not forget the broader vision of Pierre de Coubertin, whose energy led to the re-founding of the Olympics and the first modern games in 1896. His 'Ode to Sport' includes the lines:

'O Sport, You are Peace! ...
... Through you the young of the
entire world learn to respect one
another,
and thus the diversity of national traits
becomes a source of generous and
peaceful emulation!'

The participants' processions in the opening and closing ceremonies embody the welcome of the host nation and fellowship of the athletes and their supporters, united in a common commitment to sport. The welcome will stretch far beyond the stadia, extending not just to the competitors and their teams, but to all who come to spectate. It will be offered not just by the staff of the Olympic Village, but by people in the local area and beyond.

ROOTS has taken this opportunity to provide resources to help focus our thoughts and commit our hearts to a gigantic act of British hospitality.

Biblical context

Genesis 18.1.8

Our resources take the story of Abraham and Sarah as a starting point for exploring hospitality. You can use this version of the text in the all-age service.

An abundant welcome

Based on Genesis 18.1-8

Long ago, a man called Abraham lived with his wife Sarah. Abraham and Sarah were very old and they had no children. They didn't live in a house with a spare room or a sofa bed. They lived in tents, and often packed everything up to move somewhere else. Abraham and Sarah were very good people, they loved God and tried to live the right way.

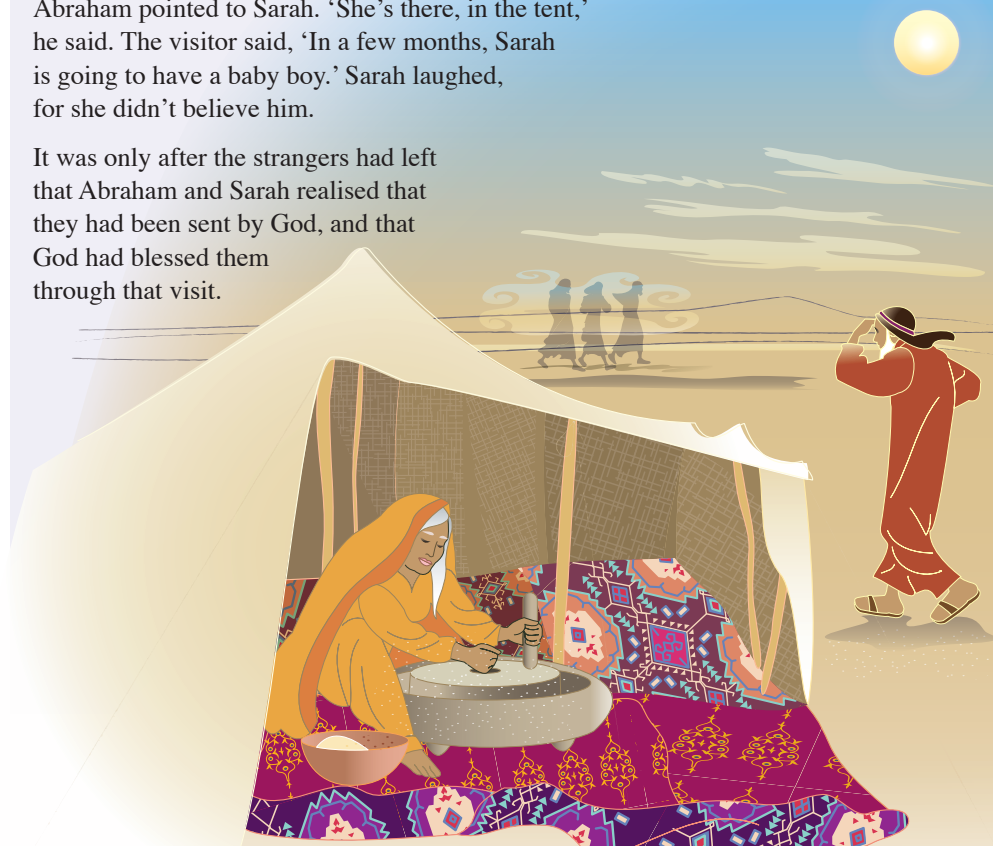
One day, when the sun was high in the sky, Abraham was sitting by his tent when three visitors walked towards him out of the desert. He ran over to them and invited them into the shade of his tent for a while. He offered them something to eat, and they said yes.

Sarah was in the tent. Abraham hurried over and asked her to prepare food for the visitors. She took three measures of flour, which is a lot, and kneaded it to make bread cakes. He then chose a calf, tender and good, and a servant prepared it. Abraham and Sarah offered their visitors bread made from the finest flour, the best meat they had and milk to drink. They did all they could to make their guests feel welcome and cared for.

When it was all ready, Abraham presented the food to the visitors and stood with them while they ate it.

Then one of the visitors said to Abraham, 'Where is Sarah?' Abraham pointed to Sarah. 'She's there, in the tent,' he said. The visitor said, 'In a few months, Sarah is going to have a baby boy.' Sarah laughed, for she didn't believe him.

It was only after the strangers had left that Abraham and Sarah realised that they had been sent by God, and that God had blessed them through that visit.



The heritage of Christian hospitality

The Rule of St Benedict

The Olympics prompt us to see all people as our brothers and sisters through the common interest of sport. We are called to excel in offering the gifts of welcome and of hospitality. In this venture, the ancient Rule of St Benedict and the practice of Benedictine hospitality over the centuries offers a good guide.

Long before the days of budget hotel chains, a network of accommodation for travellers stretched across Europe. It was possible for travellers by foot, mule and donkey, to travel from Edinburgh to Rome or Lisbon to Berlin, with a reasonable assurance of finding a welcome and shelter for the night in the monasteries and priories that studded the continent.

The roots of this monastic hospitality can be found in the Bible. The Rule of St Benedict, which served as the fundamental guide to the majority of medieval monastic communities, drew on Scripture to set down a handbook for cooperative Christian living.

Probably the most succinct and pithy inspiration is in Matthew 25.31-41:

‘Truly I tell you, as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me’.

Here we find the phrase:

‘I was a stranger and you welcomed me.’ (Matthew 25.35)

Christians were expected to offer hospitality, to be people who welcomed the stranger and those in need. This remains true today, and we recall the indictment of the world in the Prologue to St John’s Gospel:

‘He (the Word of God) was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him’.

Are you ready to welcome a stranger?

Case study

At Emmanuel United Reformed Church in Cambridge, a café is the gateway to the church. Run in partnership with MENCAP, the café is key to the welcome that the church offers to local workers and visitors to the city. ‘Our numbers were down this year,’ said Jan, the Community Development Director, ‘until a major exhibition opened at the museum down the road. Then we were flooded with visitors, as people discovered a warm welcome, no pressure and nourishing fair-trade food.’

Over to you...

Reflect on your community and how ready you are to welcome and offer sustenance.

- Q To which individuals or groups do you offer hospitality?
- Q What opportunities are there in your area for you to develop the hospitality you offer?
- Q How could you involve everyone in welcoming and hospitality, breaking out of established patterns and roles?

Activity Make a welcome banner

Engage everyone in expressing the diversity of your community.

You will need: a roll of lining paper or wallpaper with plain backing; lots of felt tips or markers in a wide range of colours; pictures of flags of all nations.

- Write the words ‘All welcome’ in huge letters across a length of the paper to create a banner. Bubble writing or other open shapes would be ideal.
- Invite people to think about their own background: where they come from, where their parents and their parents’ parents came from. Ask them to identify the flags of countries they have a connection with.
- Using pens in the colours of their heritage flags, ask people to write their names on the welcome banner, and add decoration if they wish. Everyone can then help fill in the big words on the banner using the myriad of colours.
- Display the banner in a prominent position.



Gigantic welcome

A service for all ages on the theme of hospitality

As Abraham offered hospitality to three strangers who walked in out of the desert, so the people of Britain will be offering hospitality to people from all over the world, as we host the Olympic and Paralympic Games.

Planning

Organise a procession to open your worship. Identify different groups in the church community, from choir to cleaners, crèche to retirement club, including people to represent the congregation. Ensure everyone is involved. Invite each group to decide on something to be their 'banner', e.g. the cleaners might carry a broom, the music group an instrument, etc. Plan a route around the church, inside and out, whatever your building allows, and choose an appropriate piece of music for accompaniment. Downloads of the theme from the 1981 film *Chariots of Fire* are easy to find. At the end of the procession each group places its item at the front of the church, before taking their seats for the service.

For *Thinking about hospitality* in the *Gather* section, get a copy or copies of the picture *La Vendedora de piñas* by Diego Rivera: www.posterazzi.com/Vendedora-de-Pinas-Poster-p/isiddr02.htm; or www.tinyurl.com/AllPosters3. Prepare fair-trade pineapples to display, and plates of pineapple cubes and cocktail sticks, to pass around in the session.

For *Explore the Word*, download the quotations template from the [WEB](#) and cut it into separate quotations about hospitality. You could also display them as a rolling projection, as a series of posters around the worship space.

For the Intercessions, print out and cut up the template with outlines of pineapples [WEB](#).

Gather

Call to worship

Let us make a space where the stranger finds rest.

All are welcome in this place.

Let us create freedom for those seeking justice.

All are welcome in this place.

Let us build room for young and old.

All are welcome in this place.

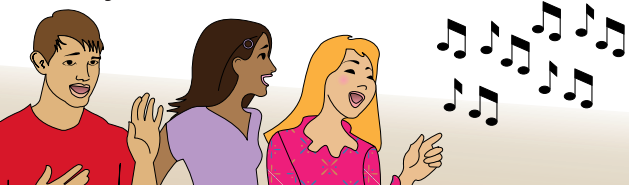
Gathering words

At the heart of the Olympics Opening Ceremony is the procession of competing athletes. They represent many nations and a huge range of sports. Our church communities reflect a diversity of interests, skills and backgrounds, and we shall celebrate this now as we make our own procession, displaying our many talents, gifts and offerings.

The procession

Gather everyone together with the items they are to carry and start off, playing music to accompany the procession. Gather all the items together at the front of the worship space at the end.

Hymn 'All are welcome'



An opening prayer

Welcoming God, open our lives to receive the visitor with your spirit of overflowing generosity and self-giving love. Open our eyes and hearts to see Christ in the unexpected stranger. Open our hearts and minds to greet all creation as a guest. Flood our meanness, saturate our small mindedness, drench our un-generosity, In your name, God, who is un-bounding in love. Amen.

Thinking about hospitality

Display Diego Rivera's picture *La Vendedora de Piñas* (see *Planning*). Invite some people to bring forward fair-trade pineapples and plates of pineapple chunks and cocktail sticks, and place them on a table below the picture.

Pineapples grew first in the Americas. Today they are grown across the world in warm climates as a valued source of food. Tradition says that when Christopher Columbus landed in the Caribbean, the local people gave him a pineapple as a sign of hospitality. The pineapple became associated with hospitality across the world.

Invite some people from the congregation to pass around the plates of pineapple chunks. As people are eating, invite them to talk in small groups and share stories or moments when they have experienced or seen acts of generous hospitality.

Hymn 'Brother, sister let me serve you'

Open the Word

A poem about hospitality

Born in present day Afghanistan, Rumi, the author of this poem, was a thirteenth-century Persian mystic and poet.

This being human is a guesthouse;
every morning a new arrival:
a joy, a depression, a meanness,
some momentary awareness comes
as an unexpected visitor.
Welcome and entertain them all,
even if they're a crowd of sorrows,
who violently sweep your house
empty of its furniture.

Still treat each guest honourably.

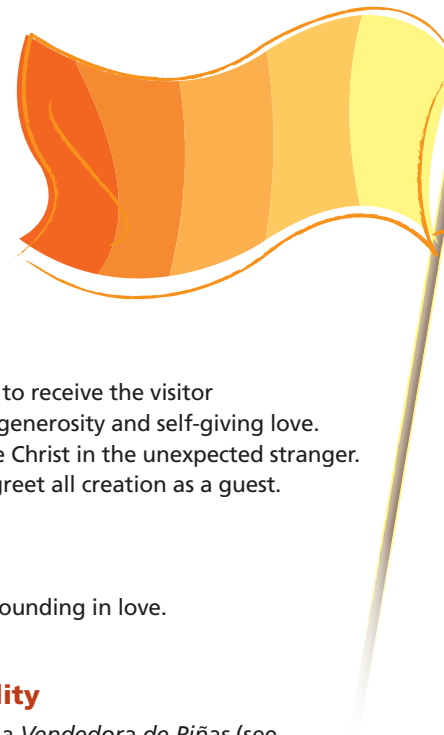
She may be clearing you out for some new delight:
the dark thought, the shame, the malice.

Meet them all at the door laughing and invite them in.

Be grateful for whatever comes
because each has been sent as
a guide from beyond!

Present the Word Genesis 18.1-8

You will need: two or three bags of flour or a cardboard cut out of a mound of flour; bread rolls in two baskets; three glasses of milk on a tray; a narrator and three people to mime the characters presented in the reading. If you have the technology, you could project images of grain stores and banquets, to illustrate the reading.





Before you begin, you may like to invite people to imagine the quantities involved. Use two or three ordinary 1.5 kilo bags of flour to help. It is suggested that 'a measure' of flour (Hebrew *seah*) would have been around seven kilos – between four and five bags of flour as we know them. Three measures was therefore 21 kilos – around 14 bags of flour.

The narrator reads the passage, matching the text to the actions. Use the version of the passage on page 1, or read it from a Bible.

Abraham sits with his head covered, deep in thought. The three strangers come towards him. Eventually Abraham looks up and sees them. He approaches them and bows low. He invites them to sit and mimes washing their feet.

Abraham hurries off to speak to Sarah. When Abraham asks her to take three measures of flour, people with bags of flour come forward and place them centrally. Or bring in an enormous cardboard cut out of a mound of flour. Then on the words 'kneaded it, and made bread cakes...' Sarah mimes kneading bread.

Abraham then rushes off again and brings glasses of milk to the strangers. Finally Abraham and Sarah bring baskets of bread rolls to offer the strangers. Sarah leaves and Abraham remains, as the strangers begin to eat.

Song 'Since the world was young' from Heaven shall not wait (WGWG), or the Taizé chant 'Eat this bread'.

Explore the Word

Invite people to look at the quotations about hospitality [WEB](#) and to select a card with the one they like best. When everyone has selected a quotation, reflect on the Abraham story and consider these questions together:

- What would overwhelming, outrageous generosity look like in our community?
- Where is it happening already?
- What might we need to change for it to happen?

Respond to the Word

Use this activity or one listed under in Activities for all.

Reflect

- Thomas Merton (1915-1968) was a Trappist monk who lived for part of his life near Louisville, Kentucky. Read this quotation from his book *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*.
'In Louisville, at the corner of Fourth and Walnut, in the center of the shopping district, I was suddenly overwhelmed with the realization that I loved all those people, that they were mine and I theirs, that we could not be alien to one another even though we were total strangers. It was like waking from a dream of separateness.'
- Invite people in silence to be aware of the people sitting next to them; then of the people they met or saw on the way to church; the needy people in the community; those who pass through your community. You could end with this prayer.

Generous and hospitable God,
enlarge our understanding of welcome.
May this place become one where
the stranger enters to become a friend.
Remove our language of them and us.

Open our doors, and our walls of suspicion
so that freedom may flow, and
breathe upon us your spirit of open-handed bounty.
In the name of Jesus who gives life,
life in all its fullness.

Amen.

Simple worship activity

You will need: bags of flour; large bowls; scoops; small plastic bags with a Welcome biscuits recipe [WEB](#) stuck on them, plus bag ties.

- Beforehand, empty the flour into large bowls and place them around the worship space.
- Invite people to come and take a bag, put into it a scoop of flour and return to their place.
- Then ask them to hold up their bags of flour and remember Jesus' words about hospitality when five thousand people were fed:

The disciples said 'Send them away to buy something for themselves to eat.' But Jesus answered them, 'You give them something to eat.' Jesus blessed and broke the loaves.

And all ate and were filled. (Mark 6.36-42)

- Invite people to take their bags of flour home and bake the biscuits to share with others in their local area.

Intercessions

You will need: slips of paper with the outline of a pineapple [WEB](#); a pen or pencil for each person.

- Distribute the paper slips and pens. Invite people to think back to the pineapple conversations and the generosity they discussed, and to sum up each quality by writing a word or short phrase on their paper. Alternatively, they could draw a picture. Collect up the papers and place them at the front of the worship space.
- A leader could pick some up and identify the quality behind the stories depicted, and use this formula for prayer: Most generous God, pour upon us your spirit of... (insert one of the qualities).

Hymn 'Will you come and follow me?'

Send out

Live in faith

Invite people to take home the quotation they selected in *Explore the Word* and put it in a prominent place where it might influence their thoughts and actions in the coming week.

Pray

Be sure to welcome strangers into your home. By doing this, some people have welcomed angels as guests, without even knowing it. Hebrews 13.2

In the stranger,
in the visitor,
in the outsider,
we will see Christ. **Amen.**

Activities for all

These activities, suitable for all ages, could be used in the Gigantic welcome service, in regular worship services throughout the period of the Games, or at a special event.

Play Get ready to bake relay

You will need: flour; spoons; mixing bowls.

- Play a relay game. Divide into teams and line the teams up at one end of the space. Put an empty bowl for each team at the starting line. At the other end of the space, put a bowl full of flour for each team. Give each team a spoon.
- The aim of the game is to collect the flour needed to bake a cake from one mixing bowl, and put it into the other bowl, using a spoon. Players take turns to run to the flour bowl, get a spoonful of flour and bring it back to the empty bowl.
- The first team to move all their flour, or the team with the most flour at the end of the allotted time, wins. Extend the game by introducing more ingredients to 'prepare'.

Make Tents

You will need: materials to build tents – sheets, tarpaulins, blankets; large cardboard tubes; string and tape.

- Invite people to work in groups to create a tent. You could have a competition and judge the best, the most luxurious or imaginative tent!
- Talk about what it would be like to live in tents, moving on from place to place (be sensitive towards anyone for whom moving regularly is a reality). What could people do in their tents to make visitors welcome?
- If making big tents is not practical, make tabletop tents with small pieces of fabric held up with twigs, cocktail or kebab sticks (taking care with the sharp ends).

Research Hospitality

You will need: Bibles; a dictionary; pens and paper.

- Work in groups. Consider together what 'hospitality' means. Look up definitions in different dictionaries.
- Find some of these Bible references and talk about what the Bible has to say about hospitality: Genesis 18.1-15; Leviticus 19.34; 1 Kings 17.10-16; Luke 10.38-42; Romans 12.9-13; Hebrews 13.1-2; 1 Peter 4.8-10.
- Spend some time thinking together about what hospitality is. Abraham and Sarah believed it was important to be hospitable. Is it still important today? Why? What can we do to show hospitality?

Make Quick food!

You will need: tortilla wraps; fillings such as chopped peppers, mushrooms, grated cheese, cooked chicken.

- Sarah provided a delicious meal for the three strangers. Invite people to create tasty wraps with the tortillas and fillings to share at the end of your worship or group session.
- Talk about what sort of meal you might prepare for visitors. Would you do something quick and easy or something elaborate and grand? What other preparations might you need to make?

Assemble Welcome packs

You will need: paper and pens; digital camera and the facility to print off photos, if possible.

- What information do you think visitors coming to the UK for the Games will need to know?
- If some strangers were to visit your church or community as part of their Olympic travels, what information would they need to make them feel welcome? Work together to create a 'Welcome pack' for visitors. Try to include some photos in the pack.

Create Signs of welcome

You will need: pens; paper; examples of information signs (an internet search will give plenty of results).

- When we're in an unfamiliar place, we often rely on picture signs for information. What signs do we see every day that give essential information? Look at some signs together and say what they mean.
- Invite people to think about what kind of sign would show that your church or group is a welcoming community. Create a welcome sign for your church. Send a photo of your finished sign to us at rootsinfo@rootsontheweb.com and we will create a gallery of signs which can be shared by all our users.



Pray Welcoming everyone

You will need: large sheets of paper; pens.

- On large sheets of paper, invite individuals or small groups to create a word and picture map to show all the different people who are involved in making the Games happen – in organisation and management, building, transport, accommodation, training venues, judging, etc.
- Use the maps as a stimulus for prayer.
- Thank God for everyone working to welcome the thousands of participants and visitors, and ask him to help us play our part in showing hospitality, not just around the Olympics, but every day.

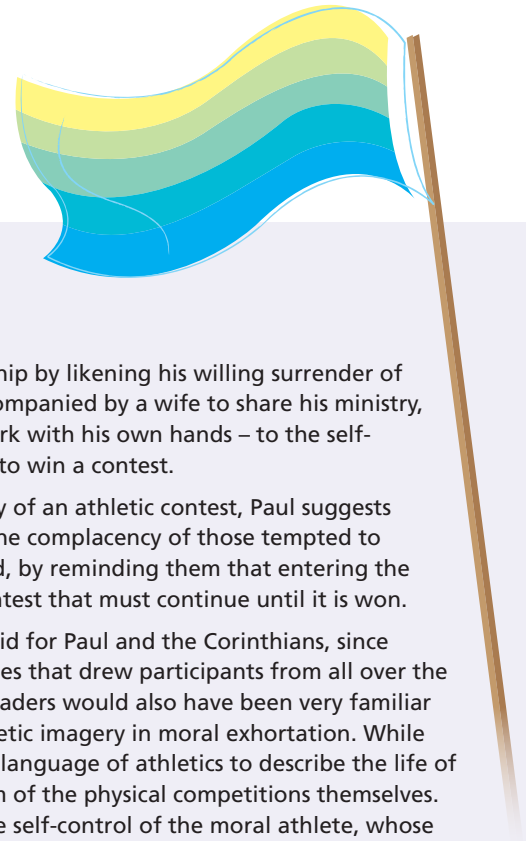
Run to win

An alternative approach based on 1 Corinthians 9.24-27

As a contrast to the exploration of hospitality in the first part of these resources, we offer a Bible study here and at www.rootsontheweb.com/run_to_win we offer a range of other materials focused on 1 Corinthians 9.24-27.

In 1 Corinthians 9.24-27 we are reminded by Paul that being Christians does not allow us to rest on our laurels. The wreath that really counts can be conferred only in the future of God, 'who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ' (1 Corinthians 15.57).

Paul uses the metaphor of an athletic contest to illuminate the Christian life. This Bible study explores it to make connections between our understanding of our faith and our interest in the Olympic Games.



Bible Study

Bible notes

Paul concludes his defence of his apostleship by likening his willing surrender of his privileges – his choosing not to be accompanied by a wife to share his ministry, his stepping down the social ladder to work with his own hands – to the self-discipline with which an athlete prepares to win a contest.

Inviting his readers to consider his analogy of an athletic contest, Paul suggests they apply it to themselves. He counters the complacency of those tempted to rest on their laurels now they are baptised, by reminding them that entering the Christian life is but the beginning of a contest that must continue until it is won.

Images of the Games were particularly vivid for Paul and the Corinthians, since Corinth hosted the biennial Isthmian Games that drew participants from all over the Graeco-Roman world. And Paul and his readers would also have been very familiar with the almost commonplace use of athletic imagery in moral exhortation. While many teachers and philosophers used the language of athletics to describe the life of the sage, they combined this with criticism of the physical competitions themselves. Cynics and Stoics in particular spoke of the self-control of the moral athlete, whose victory surpassed that of the 'those rotten boxers' at the Isthmian games.

Paul certainly contrasts the Isthmian 'perishable wreath', which was made from withered wild celery, with the 'imperishable' wreath of ultimate salvation. When Paul uses athletic imagery to describe the Christian life, he sounds as though he actually admires the dedicated participants in the physical games, as they compete according to the rules, straining to finish their race and take first prize.

Make connections

The Isthmian Games and the Olympic Games were religious festivals as well as athletic events, one held in honour of Poseidon and the other in honour of Zeus. In AD 393 they were suppressed by the Emperor Theodosius I, whose attack on the traditional pagan rituals was part of his project to establish Christianity as the official state religion.

We may follow Paul in enjoying the Games and admiring the competitors, but what values do we think the great festival of the modern Olympics celebrates? Paul makes the point that entering a race is not the same as winning it. Ancient competitors, like their modern counterparts, were known for their commitment to their rigorous training, and those who succeeded at sports were as famous then as they are now.

Perhaps Paul's point is more about perseverance than competition. Without an ongoing commitment to preaching the gospel, particularly in concern for the weak with whom Christ identified, even an apostle may be disqualified from the race he has entered, but not yet won.

Explore

Beating the air

- Reflect on the image of ill-directed blows in a boxing match. What aspects of your own life, or the life of your congregation, does it suggest to you?
- What sort of training would help us as Christians to aim in the right direction?

Enslaving my body

- Do you find Paul's emphasis on bodily discipline and self-control negative or positive?
- Can this image help us to live well with consideration for those around us?

ROOTS www.rootsontheweb.com

Week by week

You will find a wide selection of additional material linked to 1 Corinthians 9.24-27 on the ROOTS website at www.rootsontheweb.com/run_to_win, including drama scripts, modern stories, sermon ideas, prayers and much more.

Contributors to these resources were
Anna Baker, Arnold Browne,
Jonathan Cotton OSB, Janet Nicholls,
Peter Privett.

© ROOTS for Churches Ltd 2012
ROOTS for Churches Ltd is an ecumenical
partnership of denominations and other
Christian organisations which publishes
weekly lectionary-based worship and
learning materials.

**Find out more about the
ROOTS resources at
www.rootsontheweb.com**