

Are you fit?

If we look around us, we see that physical fitness and good health are major preoccupations of many people in today's society. A glance through the magazines in the corner shop or near the checkouts in our local supermarket will show proof of this. Almost certainly we'll see a feature on the latest diet. We might come across an article promoting an exercise programme guaranteed to take a large number of inches off the waist in mere weeks. Another may give information on how many people died of heart disease last year. And in one publication after another, advertisers declare how using their products will benefit our health. If only fitness were as easy to achieve as buying and reading magazines like these.....



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Sadly, we all know it isn't that easy. Achieving fitness takes time and effort. If we haven't exercised for a while, we may need a check-up before we start a new activity. We need to eat properly and have a balanced diet, rather than just picking at things here and there as the fancy takes us. We need to give time to getting fit, and we have to be disciplined and keep on working at it even when it becomes less enjoyable. And we need to avoid things that don't contribute to our fitness - whether that be saying no to that extra ice-cream or chocolate brownie, or saying no to over-training so much that we injure ourselves or get over-tired.

But there's more to fitness (and to you) than meets the eye. Physical fitness isn't the only thing we ought to be striving for. Good health and vitality depend not only on physical fitness, but also on emotional and spiritual fitness. Just like the body, the spirit requires regular maintenance. As many of you know,

alongside my work at St Michael's, I work nationally as a sports chaplain. (See www.scorechaplaincy.org.uk if you'd like to know more.) When some people first hear about this, they think it sounds a bit odd. They can see a reason for hospital or forces chaplains - people are in need then, either through illness or because they're going into dangerous situations - but why sports chaplains when sportspeople are all healthy? Well, one reason why many of the premiership & championship football clubs, a good number of major rugby clubs, some county cricket clubs and a number of gyms have chaplains is because they recognise that there is more to good health than just physical fitness. Each of us is made up of body, mind and spirit, and we have to be fit in all three parts. Spiritual fitness is as important for our wellness as is physical fitness.

In the New Testament, training for the Christian life is often compared to the way athletes prepare themselves and stay in shape. There are several references to running the race, and to keeping on going even when the going is tough. (Some of these references make me think that perhaps God has a soft-spot for marathon runners!) And in his first letter to Timothy, St Paul says "Take the time and the trouble to keep yourself spiritually fit" (1 Timothy 4 v7).

Just like physical fitness, spiritual fitness doesn't just happen. The path to spiritual fitness is just as practical, and it involves time and effort. We may need a check up with a priest, spiritual director or respected Christian friend to assess where we are before we start on the path or take a new direction in our discipleship. We need to have a balanced diet of activities, not always just picking at the things we like in church life. We'll need some discipline and 'stickability' to keep at it when things get tough or when we're distracted from our pathway. And there'll be things we have to say no to, both things we learn that Christians in general shouldn't do, and things that just aren't the right thing for us as an individual. As with physical fitness, we

need to practice good health habits. For the Christian, these will probably include time spent with God, prayer, Bible reading and going to church, but there is no particular formula that suits everyone. Just as with physical fitness, each of us has to find the plan appropriate to us, if we are to be spiritually fit and so able to run with perseverance the race of life that is set before us.....

The Revd Mary Vickers