

Salute - the Christian Connection

Publicity for "Salute - The Movie" describes the film as "a journey back to the 1960's and beyond, to examine what has now become one of the most famous Olympic moments in history."

This moment became an iconic image captured and displayed around the world, and now is one of the most recognisable, if not the most recognisable sporting image of the 20th Century. It is also a very contemporary image, given the recent Beijing Olympics and the questions that have been raised about human rights and freedom. Back forty years at the Mexico City Olympics there was a simple podium and the medal presentation for the men's 200m. Here two African-American men, Tommie Smith (Gold medallist) and John Carlos (Bronze), raised gloved fists during the American anthem, and bowed their heads in solemn reflection, thereby creating an enormous controversy that led to their removal from the Games.

Perhaps because few people knew his name, the Australian runner and the silver medallist, Peter Norman, became 'the white guy in the photo', and in Australia at least a forgotten Olympic medallist during the last three decades. Peter supported the protest by silently standing alongside the men, wearing a badge for the Olympic Project for Human Rights (which was focussing on racial equality in the Olympics). In Sydney there is a very well known mural of this photo near Macdonaldtown Railway Station. This was previously always seen when on a train heading to Central and the city on the left hand side, but due to the noise abatement project for the Macdonald Stabling area it has sadly now obscured by huge walls, thus limiting the opportunity for people to see and perhaps learn about this Australian character.

The movie and the book set out to make Peter Norman known to the Australian community, and tell the story of a time that was right for his running. It is worth noting that Peter Norman's time at the Mexico City Games still stands as the Australian record for the 200 metres – 20.06 seconds.

Peter did not compete in another Olympics and the book also provides a fuller consideration of the issues the film raises in terms of Peter's non-selection for the 1972 Munich Games.

As the publicity further states, the film is also personal, as the director of the film, Matt Norman, was Peter Norman's nephew, and with Damian Johnstone, wrote the tie-in book: *A Race to Remember: The Peter Norman Story*.

Both film and book are essential to gaining an understanding of Peter Norman, and also an appreciation of a particular time in the world and in Australia.

As well as spectacular use of footage from the Mexico City Olympics, including some wonderful and never before seen heats of some of the races, including one example of great Australian humour from Peter Norman (I will leave this for you to see, rather than spoil the surprise), and the actual final event itself, the film winds through the 1960s, reminding the viewer of the context in terms of the civil rights era in the USA, and there is an extraordinary range of footage of actual events in 1968.

The book has pain-staking detail about the actual running events which Peter was involved in from his youth to his eventual involvement as an Olympic contender, as well as post-Mexico sporting events, but there is also extensive information about Peter's personal life and the difficulties, changes and joys, especially in the 1970s and 1980s.

Readers of the book will be interested to learn of Peter Norman's strong Salvation Army background in suburban Melbourne through his parents, friends and the significant Christian legacy from his parents and grandparents. Peter grew up in the tightly familial world of the Salvation Army movement, and was very involved in church meetings and events (including the local band and teaching Sunday School). Peter married a Salvation Army girl, Ruth Newnham in 1964 at the Thornbury Salvation Army Hall, and their first home was in a former Hall at Newport.

It is worth considering the influence of his Salvation Army background. What did Peter learn about the Christian life from the Salvation Army? Damian Johnstone outlines many points in the chapter "Sundays belongs to the Salvos", and it would appear that certain Christian values, rather than Christian doctrines, had the strongest lasting influence, including an acceptance of all people as being created equal, and the need to show tolerance and love (p.2).

Peter clearly struggled with some aspects of the Salvation Army and there was an early tension with the institutional side of organised religion on the question of the Sabbath. Peter could not understand how some people could use their gifts on Sundays and others could not. He explained that "My gift was running, so it was only right for me to make the most of the gift I have been born with." (p. 114). He had the words 'God is Love' stitched on the back of his tracksuit by Ruth, so he could make a statement about his faith, saying this gave him "... opportunity to tell them [people] what I believe in." (p. 129).

Later in his career he had 'Jesus Saves' stitched onto his tracksuit, though he was only allowed to wear them during training due to 'advertising restrictions' at the time.

It was in the area of his increasing consumption of alcohol and especially sexual relationships outside of marriage that became key areas of difficulty. Matt Norman talked about what was clearly a difficult and emotional experience, namely Peter's leaving of Ruth and three small children in 1971, and his resulting new marriage to Jan. As Matt explains, Peter did something so completely against the Salvation Army way, and this was always remembered as a grave mistake, and a time when Christian grace and forgiveness was tested to the limit.

From my reading of the book and discussions, it appears that Peter took on a much worldier outlook following the 1968 Olympic Games, though initially he still spent significant time spent speaking about being a Christian athlete and attending church services and events. Factors I see as influential in this were the demands of travel, and simply being away from the family and the resultant disconnection with his church life and family coupled with a new freedom and increased opportunities.

A perceptive remark made by Peter's brother Laurie in the book states that "Peter was probably what you'd call a Christian and abided by Peter's rules and that's why he did what he did (p. 185). Peter did appear to pick and choose those elements of the Salvation Army and also of the wider Christian community that he took to heart.

Peter Norman died suddenly in 2006 (from a massive heart attack) at the age of 64.

As well as the personal implications for all the family, his death had a significant effect on the development of the film and especially promotion, as it was simply assumed he would be there to lend personal support.

A service for Peter Norman – a celebration of his life, was held on 9 October 2006 at Williamston Town Hall with over 1000 people attending. Leading the service was Revd Cheryl Johnson, who was the minister at Williamstown Church of Christ, and the moving and distinct service provides further insight into Peter's life, with participants including Tommie Smith and John Carlos paying tribute.

His daughters (from his second marriage) selected many interesting songs and pieces, including the theme from the film *Chariots of Fire*, (one of Peter's favourites), and this was played as Peter's coffin was carried from the service. *Chariots of Fire* won Oscars in 1981 for Best Film, and for Vangelis for Music (Original Score).

I found this choice of music and the comments about his love of the music very interesting, as this film is of course all about running in the Olympics (the 1924 Paris Games) and Christian faith, and it raised for me the whole question again of the Sabbath and running on Sunday, as this was the central element of discussion in the film for Eric Liddell, the Scottish runner who eventually became a missionary in China.

With his background, Peter would have been very aware of the words from Paul the Apostle about running the race. "Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one gets the prize? Run in such a way as to get the prize. Everyone who competes in the games goes into strict training. They do it to get a crown that will not last; but we do it to get a crown that will last forever. (1 Corinthians 9: 24 – 25, NIV).

I see the Peter Norman Story as a modern day parable for all of us about the potential good and also the potential danger and seduction that fame can bring. It is also a call for us to reflect deeply on our values in all areas of our life.

At the end of the film, Peter is asked about how he would like to be remembered – and while he would like to be remembered as ‘interesting’, I could not help but pick up a sense of definite sadness in his eyes, and I don’t think this was related to him not winning the gold medal in 1968.

One intriguing aspect of the film is the question of God’s timing in the arrangement of the three people on the podium. Certainly, the now older men, Smith and Carlos reflected on God's plan and timing, and it was clear that the event would not have had the same impression on them personally if there had not been a supportive third person. Peter Norman did not want to play up the right time and divine intervention idea, but it is clear to me that it caused him to continue to reflect on God in his life.

**© Peter Bentley
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Note1 : First published in ACCatalyst: Volume 2, September 2008

Note 2: A longer version of this article was published in December 2008 in the journal *Zadok Perspectives*.

Salute the Movie continues its campaign for wider recognition of this Olympic sprinter, with the DVD release scheduled for January 2009.
A Race to Remember The Peter Norman Story, RRP \$34.99, PB, PP 336 + 3 x PP pictures inserts, Jo Jo Publishing, Melbourne, July 2008.
Damian Johnstone and Matt Norman.