

Clive and the Olympian

Clive was sitting on a bench in the park enjoying an unusually warm day in what had been a dull, wet Summer. He was thinking about the pictures he had seen on the television news last evening of people carrying the Olympic torch along the street in a town whose name he could not recall.

'What's it all about?' he mused to himself. 'It's not as though it's the same torch that gets passed on. Why all the fuss about a *flame*; that's just rapid oxidation of gas. Neither the oxygen nor the gas is in anyway the same as they started with in the ruins of ancient Olympia in Greece. I don't get it.'

He suddenly became aware that someone else was sitting on the bench and softly singing:

Αρχαίο Πνεύμα αθάνατο, αγνέ πατέρα
του ωραίου, του μεγάλου και του αληθινού,
κατέβα, φανερώσου κι άστραψε εδώ πέρα
στη δόξα της δικής σου γης και τ' ουρανού.

He looked and saw a well-built bearded man of indeterminate age. He was certainly not a young man, but you would not call him old. His eyes were piercing and his voice melodious.

"Er, what?" said Clive, a little surprised.

"Just singing the opening of the Olympic anthem," said the stranger.

"Oh," said Clive. "I see; I guess it must be Greek."

"Yes," replied the stranger. "At least what is called Greek nowadays. It was a bit different in my day."

Clive wasn't sure what the stranger meant by that; he sat wondering.

But the stranger continued: "I thought it would explain the flame."

"It might," said Clive, "if I understood Greek. But I don't. What do the words mean?"

"O ancient immortal Spirit," replied the stranger, "pure father of beauty, of greatness and of truth, descend, reveal yourself and flash your lightning right here in the glory of your own earth and heaven."

"So," said Clive, "you mean the flame represents an ancient immortal spirit. I suppose you mean the spirit of the ancient games, when the flame is lit at Olympia."

"I don't mean anything," replied the stranger. "I didn't write the words. It was the Greek poet, Kostís Palamás, who wrote them. But, yes, I guess that he did mean something like that."

"OK," said Clive. "And I suppose the bit about 'flashing your lightning right here' refers to the lighting of the Olympic cauldron."

"Well, sort of," said the stranger. "But think in whose honor the ancient games were held."

"Oh," said Clive, "Zeus, wasn't it? I seem to recall he had something to do with thunder and lightning."

"Quite right," said the stranger. "And who do you think the father of beauty, greatness and truth is? But," he added, laughing, "I think they'd be a little startled if one day I did descend, reveal myself and flash my lightning."

"You're, er, you're..." said Clive, hesitantly.

"Yes," laughed the stranger, "I am Zeus, father of gods and men. But Kostís got rather carried away with the bit about 'the glory of your own earth and heaven.' My earth and heaven? They are far older than I am. We Olympians are

the children of the Titans, and heaven and earth were there even before the Titans."

"But," said Clive, "Kostís couldn't have meant you, could he? I mean – you're a false god – you're not real."

"I feel real enough," said Zeus, still laughing. "But, no, few people worship us now. It makes for a much more peaceful life in Olympos, I can tell you. As for Kostís – he was part of the late 19th century romantic movement that created the modern Olympic Games. I think his ancient, immortal spirit, true father and so on is a sort of pink and fluffy abstraction of a link between the ancient and modern games, even though it does contain a reference to my lightning. It's sort of confused."

"But there was a flame at the ancient Olympics, wasn't there?" asked Clive.

"A flame?" said Zeus. "I should say there was! Not just one flame either; there were flames kept alight in the sanctuaries before my temple and the temple of Hera, my wife, as well as in the sanctuary of my sister, Hestia, goddess of hearth and home."

"So," asked Clive, "the modern practice of lighting the Olympic flame at Olympia has ancient precedent?"

"Not really," replied Zeus. "An actress pretends to be an ancient priestess and, using a parabolic mirror, lights a flame from the sun's rays. She's not a real priestess and they seem to have confused sun-worship with us ancient Olympians. Bah! You should have seen it in the old days. They took me and the other Olympians seriously then. My temple there was truly magnificent, and as for my statue in that temple – well, it was something to behold, I can tell you. Even though it showed me seated, it was twelve metres high. Why, if I had stood up, I'd have smashed through the roof of the temple. The statue was covered all over in gold and ivory and they reckoned it to be one of the seven wonders of the world. And so it was! If you had seen it you would not have asked if I was real; you would have known it!"

Zeus fell silent as he thought back to the ancient days.

"But," said Clive, after a few moments. "Religion was secondary, wasn't it? I mean, the real purpose of the ancient games was sports and athletics, like the modern ones."

"No, no!" thundered Zeus, making Clive shudder; then, calming down, he asked: "Where were the Olympic games held in 1916?"

"Well, they weren't," replied Clive. "There was a war going on."

"Exactly," said Zeus, "nor were there any games held in 1940 or 1944. But at the time of the ancient games there was *always a sacred truce* so that competitors could travel safely to and from the games – a *sacred* truce, one kept in honor and reverence of me, *the* Olympian. It was because of me the games were called Olympic and the sacred truce was kept."

"Oh," said Clive, feeling a little foolish. Then to justify himself, he said: "Ah, but political rivalry has come into the modern games; that's why we can't have truces and why there were boycotts in 1980 and 1984 and the terrorist attack at Munich in 1972. In fact, since then the cost of security has got greater and greater."

"I know," said Zeus, "but don't think that politicization is just a feature of the modern games. No, the rivalries between city states were certainly real and often bitter in ancient times. The games were politicized very early on and states vied with each other in their spending on celebrating the victories of their

athletes. But, however bitter wars between states might be, the sacred truce had to hold and it did hold. No one would have dared perpetrate an act of terror on such a sacred occasion."

"Oh," was all Clive could say in response.

"Your world," continued Zeus, "may be right in not worshipping me any longer. But the pink and fluffy 'ancient immortal Spirit, pure father of beauty, of greatness and of truth' is no substitute."

"I suppose not," agreed Clive, "And I suppose another big difference is that our modern athletes train hard and, although Baron de Coubertin and those who revived the games wanted competitors to be amateurs, professionalism has taken over."

"No," said Zeus, shaking his head and chuckling a little, "no, not at all."

"How so?" asked Clive, feeling slightly bewildered.

"If," answered Zeus, "you think the ancient competitors did not train, you are sorely mistaken. The pressure for cities to produce winners made sure competitors trained hard, were put on special diets and given all the facilities their city could afford. The state supported them. The Baron was a romantic aristocrat, nor was his conception of amateurism straightforward. It has proved impractical and had nothing to do with the ancient games."

"Well," said Clive, feeling a bit put down again, "there must be differences between the ancient and modern games, apart from the lack of sacred truce and the fact that the games now move around from country to country."

"Well, of course, there are," said Zeus. "But for me the biggest difference is the gross commercialization of the modern games. That never happened in my day; I would not have allowed commercial sponsors. Now they seem to have a stranglehold on things; you can be in trouble if you innocently use so-called Olympic symbols without IOC permission, and the sponsors jealously guard their brands and vigorously make sure rivals are kept strictly out of the picture."

"True," agreed Clive. "But the games cost so much that sponsorship can't be avoided."

"Why do they games cost so much?" asked Zeus, getting agitated again. "Because you have to spend such an inordinate amount on security and, forgetting the old Greek maxim, μηδὲν ἄγαν (nothing in excess) you spend obscene amounts on opening and closing ceremonies. It seems that you've ousted me, the *true Olympian*, from your so-called Olympics and substituted Mammon instead. He really is a false god!"

Clive could feel Zeus' anger building up and felt uncomfortable. Looking at his watch, he said: "Well, Zeus, it's been interesting talking with you, but I really must be going or I shall be late."

So saying, Clive got up and hurried away. He had gone barely fifty metres and was rubbing his eyes and wondering if it had all been a dream, when he was suddenly startled by a violent flash of lightning and an ear-splitting crack of thunder which shook the ground beneath him. He turned back and saw that the seat he had been sitting on was now a smoldering, charred ruin.