

# the Lutheran

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For we walk by faith, not by sight [2 Cor 5:7]

It wasn't only in the velodrome that **faith was pushed to the max** for Paralympian cyclist Kieran Modra.

Photo: Theo Modra



# by faith, not sight

by Rosie Scheffe



**Imagine hurtling around a wooden track at 55 kilometres an hour, being whipped around the corners as though you were on a sideshow ride. What little you can see is a complete blur, while the noises of the velodrome beneath and the crowd around you combine into one deafening roar.**

Imagine that the only communication you have with your pilot, seated centimetres in front of you, is through

the pedals of the bike. You have to trust his eyes and skills completely and go for it, even while the back wheel flexes and strains, seemingly contradicting what the pressure on your pedals is telling you.

Faith and fear are two words that Paralympian cyclist and world-record-holder Kieran Modra uses a lot as he describes his fight back from a serious accident to retirement at the top of the podium.

Back at the end of last year, things seemed to be well on track for vision-impaired Kieran Modra. He and his new sighted pilot, 20-year-old Scott McPhee, were building their partnership nicely and had announced their London 2012 intentions by setting a new world record at the 2011 World Championships.

This would be Kieran's seventh Paralympics and Scott's first, competing in four tandem cycling



**Above: Kieran in London with proud parents Theo and Sylvia**

**Right: Kieran with wife Kerry and daughters Holly (back), Makala and Janae**

**Below: The medal ceremony in London**



events for vision-impaired athletes: the four-kilometre individual pursuit, the one-kilometre time trial, the road time trial and the 110-kilometre road race.

Then, while cycling to work in peak-hour traffic one December morning, Kieran collided with a parked car.

The car was a write-off. Kieran was admitted to Adelaide's Flinders Medical Centre with two broken vertebrae in his neck and one in his lower back, and suspected brain damage.

'For a week I was unable to move', Kieran says. 'I began to fear the nights, dealing with the pain and waiting for the morning to arrive.

'Did I pray? I was struggling a lot with faith, so I was questioning where I was, asking God for a speedy recovery, asking him how this happened. There were more questions than answers; I didn't get a lot of answers.

'What am I going to be like?' Kieran wondered, as he heard that others in similar accidents had become paralysed or had died.

'I had to still be positive. I latched onto family [wife Kerry and three daughters] and onto being a husband and father to them. I thought about the others in hospital with me and what they were going through. I tried to relate to them, encourage them.

'And London was always there!

'It wasn't desperation, but I needed to get better and get back on the bike ...



how long would it take? The longer I was there, the worse it seemed to get', he said.

Kieran was transferred from Flinders Medical Centre to the Repatriation General Hospital in the suburb of Daw Park, where he was allowed to begin to move around slowly.

'I was able to get back onto a stationary bike. I'd use a walking frame to get over to it because I couldn't balance properly yet, and I'd do some weights and leg-strengthening exercises. It felt good just to be on the bike and rolling my legs over', he said.

That was the beginning of the long fight back. In March Kieran was able to visit

the South Australian Sports Institute, where he was carefully checked over before getting an all-clear to get back on his bike.

But Kieran's doctors at Flinders Medical Centre were not recommending that he do that, a problem that was finally resolved when Kieran went to the Australian Institute of Sport (AIS) in Canberra and was again minutely and carefully assessed. The AIS wrote up a plan which his doctors accepted. Finally Kieran had his way forward.

But it wouldn't be easy for the elite athlete. 'It was all about easing back, looking at my body', he said. 'But I took more steps forward than I took

## **It's also given me a closer connection to God,** a different sense of appreciation of him, looking for symbols, sensing how he's working.

back. I learnt patience; I had to listen to the people around me and take notice.

'Another thing: it completely changed my training approach. I was forced to scrap the old regime and start a new one, focused around recovery', he said.

Kieran's relationship with Scott also changed, as they began to spend the hours and hours needed together on the bike, building that crucial communication through the pedals.

With an age difference of 20 years between Scott and him, and a gulf of Paralympics experience just as wide, Kieran found he had to forge a new relationship with his pilot.

'I had to put the age difference aside and see Scott as an equal', Kieran said. 'Everything he did was about the here and now, the current situation. My experience was all in the past. The accident changed it all; I had to work out what was happening here and now.'

Kieran's favourite event is the four-kilometre individual pursuit, in which he won gold at Atlanta in 2004 and in Beijing in 2008. It is one of the first events on the Paralympics cycling schedule, with qualifying on the morning after the opening ceremony and the final that same afternoon, Thursday, 30 August.

With no competition results at all in 2012, Kieran and Scott were first on the track in qualifying, not a position Kieran is used to occupying.

'We had no idea what the others would do, so we had no other choice but to put our best time down', he said. Kieran and Scott qualified fastest.

About five hours later they raced the final, this time with another team on the opposite side of the track.

'But it still becomes your own race; you have to make sure you cross the line before the other bike', Kieran said. They crossed first in a new world-record time of 4 minutes, 17.756 seconds—about five seconds faster than the silver medallists, fellow Australians Bryce Lindores and pilot Sean Finning.

Kieran is pleased and grateful to have defended his pursuit title so successfully, although the remainder of the competition was not quite so golden. The pair were 0.001 seconds behind the bronze medal time in the one-kilometre time trial, broke a chain and did not finish their road time trial, and then had to retire when Scott became ill during the road race.

'But just to win all the time is not so much fun, either', Kieran says.

'There were so many different emotions generated, but you just can't beat standing on top of the podium for Australia. It's an awe-inspiring feeling!'

Kieran says that after a race he spends some time in prayer.

'Afterwards I can piece it all together and acknowledge God's help in the process of training. There are more battles in getting there than there are in winning a race. Looking back now, I think there are a lot of positive elements in what happened. I asked God, "Why?" I had to accept help from others and I was inspired by others. That was a trait that I didn't have before.



Photo: Theo Modra

'A lot of it was about developing the characteristic of looking more into myself but still being aware of what's going on around me. It's also given me a closer connection to God, a different sense of appreciation of him, looking for symbols, sensing how he's working.

'For me, to just get back on my feet and recover is to see God's working.'

Now back in Adelaide, the retired Paralympian is hoping that his story will help to inspire and motivate others, including the vision-impaired students he works with at the South Australian School for Vision Impairment and Seaview High School.

'Hopefully, my story is an avenue to show them what is possible, and to motivate them and other students as well, right across the board.'

**Kieran Modra and his family worship at Good Shepherd Lutheran Church, Hallett Cove, Adelaide. He is a former student at Immanuel College and grew up at Port Lincoln, where his parents Theo and Sylvia Modra are still active members of the Lutheran congregation.**

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