

SERMON FOR TRINITY II | 20.08.23

Isaiah 56: 1, 6-8; Romans 11: 1-2a, 29-32; St Matthew 15: 10-20, 21-28

Isabel did warn me: she thought it most unlikely that there would be anyone in Church today because of the Women's World Cup final in Australia. But somehow I didn't feel that we were much of a sporty lot and there would be people here - but the match did get me thinking...

Thinking about what it takes to be that fit! I don't watch much football but even to my untutored eyes the speed, the flexibility and turn of pace, the resilience and the precision of passing the ball between football players is pretty amazing and so I looked up to see how that is all achieved.

And there I read all about: continuous training, (Swedish) fartlek training, circuit training, interval training, plyometric training, flexibility training and weights training. I learned about fitness coaches and the medical backgrounds that make it possible for athletes at this level to last the 90 minutes plus of an average football game. I read about the loneliness of early morning runs or the travelling required to find the best gym or an Olympic sized swimming pool. I reflected on the amount of support each of these people need – from friends and family, coaches and sponsors - to make it all possible.

And all this encouraged me to turn to that bit in St Paul's first letter to the Corinthians, taken from his experience of watching the Greek athletes around him preparing for their famous Games. He writes: *Everyone who competes in the Games goes into strict training. So far so, good but what is he really driving at? They do it to get a crown that will not last; but we do it for a crown that will last for ever. Therefore, do not run as one who is running aimlessly or like a boxer beating the air! No, I beat my body and make it serve me so that when I preach the Gospel I will not be disqualified from the contest.*

Because I suspect the greatest pressure, even for famous footballers, is the temptation not to bother with all that training. Why put your body through all that pain and anguish when you could so easily stay in bed or do something more enjoyable?

Some of you will have heard of the writer CS Lewis. It was he who wrote the popular Narnia stories for children (eg The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe) – and for adults a series of very popular books – perhaps the most famous being 'the Screwtape Letters'.

Lewis was born just outside Belfast in 1898 and was an atheist as a young man, only coming to faith when he was about 30 after a meeting in Oxford. In his book *'Surprised by Joy'* he described himself as the most reluctant convert ever. He really didn't want believe - but he felt so taken over by his experience of God that he discovered he had no other option. And it was this that formed the backdrop to all his Christian writings because he understood what it was to be apathetic about God - and religion in general - and the need to resist as hard as possible the pull of Christianity despite knowing that it was true.

So in his book *'The Screwtape letters'*, he imagines a situation in which a senior devil, Screwtape, is writing a series of guides to a junior devil, Wormwood. By Letter number 8., Screwtape responds to Wormwood's bragging that he felt he has finally persuaded his 'patient' to give up his Christian faith. Wormwood is rather pleased with himself!

But his teacher Screwtape is not so complacent: *Has no one told you, Wormwood, about the Law of Undulation? If you had watched your patient carefully you would have seen undulation in every aspect of his life - his interest in his work, his affection for his friends, his physical appetites; they all go up and down. As long as he lives on earth, his happiness and energy will alternate with periods of dryness and numbness.*

To be successful you must watch to see what the Enemy (ie God) is making of these mood swings, these undulations. It may surprise you that the enemy makes even greater use of the troughs of despair than the peaks of success! Indeed some of the enemy's greatest friends have gone through longer and deeper troughs than anyone else. While what we want is for people to obey us, what the Enemy seeks is for people to be perfectly free. He really does want to people the universe with loathsome replicas of himself - people who have mastered and disciplined themselves so that they freely live and love like him. We want cattle who will do our bidding; he wants to make all people his children. We want to suck in; he wants to give out. We are empty and are content to be so; he is full with love that flows over.

So why doesn't the Enemy make more use of his superior power to make people behave as he would wish? Because to over-ride a person's free choice would be (to him) useless. He cannot bring himself to ravish and compel, he can only appeal. His horrid and ignoble idea is to have his cake and eat it, for people to love him in every way and yet be themselves. For him to cancel their hopes and desires will not serve.

Screwtape continues: To begin with the Enemy may make his presence felt, even though it be ever so feint. But he never allows this state of affairs to last long. Sooner or later he withdraws these supports and incentives from their conscious experience. He leaves his creatures to stand on their own feet so that when the rough times come and the troughs appear, each human learns to grow into the person he wants them to be. Their prayers in this time of dryness is what pleases him most. He wants them to walk freely and so he deliberately takes away his hand.

And, incomprehensible though this may seem to us, if the believer only has the desire to think of doing good – and not yet the action – then the Enemy is pleased even with their stumbles! So do not be deceived, Wormwood; our cause is never more in danger than when a human, though doing nothing and still intending to do good, looks around the Universe from which every trace of the Enemy seems to have vanished, and asks why he has been forsaken - and yet still desires to do that which is right: that is when our cause is in peril.

In today's Gospel Jesus puts it like this: it isn't the bad things that we see and experience that make us what we are: it is what we choose to say or do. He says: what comes out of the mouth comes from the heart, and so it is this that makes a person 'unclean'.

In other words, we each act like a kind of filter. Nothing, however distressing or distasteful it is, needs to corrupt or change us. Indeed, as the Screwtape the devilish teacher tells us, the more difficult things are, the more we are being taught how to act like Jesus.

And that is what free will is all about. But it takes training. There will be lots of times when we really can't be bothered to practice our faith or to make those hard moral choices that come our way every so often. We can't make it to Church, we can't find it in ourselves to help someone who needs us, we don't, in the words of Teresa of Avila, look with Christ's compassion on the world around us. And of course no one is making us do any of these things: that isn't God's way as Screwtape reminded us.

But with roar of the Lionesses in our ears we are reminded that without their willingness to train, there can be no success on the football field, in Sydney or anywhere else. And, hopefully, as we see them win, we will take to heart the words of St Paul, that our commitment to follow the ways of God is far more important even than a World Cup final!