**Lent United Service – Dursley Methodist Church**

**18th March 2012**

**Hebrews 11.32-40**

This part of the Lenten theme of Running the Race of Faith is entitled ‘Team Effort’. Earlier in the week I sent an email round to all the members at the Tab advertising among other things this evening’s service. I said, Simon will be drawing on many sporting analogies to explore how faith is nurtured in community. Many of these analogies will involve Burnley Football Club and so will deal with themes such as failure, defeat, despair and how to keep smiling through it all!

Don’t worry, not all my analogies will involve Burnley Football Club!

Of course the reason why we are pursuing this theme of Running the Race, is because this is Olympics year and its coming to Britain, London to be precise.

*Any one got tickets.*

I applied – but they didn’t want me –so I’m off to France for a holiday instead. To be honest, the Olympics have never really caught my imagination. I have always been more interested in team games, both watching and playing.

I opted for this title in the united services for that very reason. In preparing for this talk I had to reflect on why I prefer team sports to individual events? Is being part of a team, better than being an individual contestant? How does all that translate into the life, or the race, of faith?

*Questions: how many of you like sport – playing or watching? How many prefer team sports? Why?*

In a pithy answer to the pros and cons of individual versus team sport I would say that in individual sport the good thing is that it’s all down to you. The difficult thing is that it’s all down to you! The same for team sports. The good thing is that you are part of a team. The bad thing is that you are part of a team!

I wish I had a pound for every time someone has said to me: I m a Christian but I don’t need to go to church. Or – I am a Christian and I used to go to church!

I am obviously a firm believer in the benefit of being part of a church community – to know that we run the race of faith as a team. But I have enough experience to know that for many, Team Church does not appeal.

Let us start with the negatives first about why being part of a team can be fraught.

 A crucial component of any team is its leader, or captain, or manager. One of the reasons that England failed at the last football world Cup, was that the players didn’t get on with each other and there were too many captains in the side. The England captain john Terry had had to resign due to having an affair with a team mate’s girlfriend and although later reinstated, has been relieved again of his role due to allegations that he racially abused another player. Many of the England players captain their club sides and so there is a bit of competition and envy at those who get selected for the job for the national side.

The football manager has to win the dressing room – the respect of all the players - in order to organise them and make them work together. Some managers do this through fear and bullying. Sir Alex Ferguson is known for his hair dryer effect – his fiery temper giving players a dressing down with a lot of hot air. Brian Clough was known as old Big Head because he was full of himself. He once said I wouldn't say I was the best manager in the business. But I was in the top one.
Both he and Alex Ferguson were always concerned when players got too much power. Clough kept his players guessing each week as to whether they would be selected to play. Before the 1990- League Cup Final he was asked about his Nottingham Forest team and he said ‘the only person certain of boarding the coach is Albert Kershaw, and he’ll be driving it!’ Ferguson kicked a boot at David Beckham once, frustrated by the distraction of his celebrity lifestyle, his fashion icon status and his glamorous wife -. He believed he wasn’t concentrating on the job of playing football for Manchester United. He was quoted as saying that Manchester United is like a bus that waits for no one.

Some managers in comparison try to be everyone’s friend and win everyone’s trust, but then they often find it difficult to make hard decisions.

Some leaders, captains and managers are charismatic, motivational and inspirational figures but can have a tendency to over dominate and become too ego centric. Some are too quiet and reserved. Sven Goran Erikson was criticised as the former England manager for being the cold swede who never showed enough passion.

Some leaders have the ability to be all things to all people- to be person centred yet also task oriented. People can feel an attachment to them yet they can also respect their difficult decisions they have to make. That moment of identification can be so important. Nelson Mandela famously donned a South African rugby jersey at the final of the Rugby World Cup in South Africa in 1995. It was only a few years after the ending of apartheid. The springboks, the nickname of the South African Rugby team were always associated with white South Africa especially the Afrikaans. The story was told in the recent film Invictus. At the final Mandela took the audacious gamble of not wearing a suit but to show his colours and support the national team – it was a moment of healing and solidarity. South Africa won the game and Mandela presented the cup to their captain Francois Piennarr and said ‘thank you for what you have done for the country’. Pienaar who had come from a prejudiced Afrikaans background said ‘you’ve got it wrong. It’s what you have done that has made the difference’. Good leaders inevitably make a difference to the team.

Some teams have gifted individuals who take all the lime light and demand all the limelight and so create dissension and bad feeling among the team. No matter how good Pele and Maradona were, they still needed ten others players around them to win the World Cup. A team can have many talented and exceptional players but they don’t always make a good team. Sometimes the balance isn’t right; sometimes there isn’t room enough for all the egos on display. You get the gist.

You can I’m sure join up the dots and make your own comparisons with the power struggles and personality clashes that entail within our churches, like any other human organistaion.

Clergy usually have to go through a lengthy selection process before they are authorised, ordained, to lead churches, but once in post we often find that the role we must exercise most frequently is one of administrator and manager, a role for which we have received little explicit training. The increasing complexity of christian ministry and team ministries give increased opportunities for conflict and burn out. Many try to be the one man show, the Omni competent leader and all round good egg!

Churches are also very difficult teams to lead. Unlike a sports team where there is a clear objective – get to the final, win the gold, finish top of the league (or in Burnley’s case – avoid finishing bottom of the league) - most churches don’t have any specific strategic plan, and if there was one, it would be unlikely to command general agreement. Different people within a church often have different objectives, but these are rarely openly acknowledged. One common clash, crudely put, is between those who are committed to maintenance of church life – we need to keep things running, keep the show on the road – preferably just as its always been –because we are all creatures of habit and have invested in our routines, - and those who are committed to mission – always moving forward, change, what’s the next thing, how do we stay relevant.

A further problem about Team Church is that the number of people who have responsibilities within the church can often be quite large and it’s desirable that it be so. But a feature of teams is that they encourage people to loaf around and be inactive – because people can feel someone else will do the job. A few people do all the work while the others tend to be bums on pews.

However for team church, most people are unpaid volunteers, who to some extent, are bound to discharge their responsibilities on their own terms. When I have time, when I feel like it, and no matter what you all decide – I have to do it and I’m going to do it my way.

Much of our work is dispersed and there are few occasions when we meet up - meaning serious issues of co-ordination.

Those problems are further exacerbated by problems of attitude. Most church people care deeply about what they are doing; otherwise they wouldn’t be doing it. We score well on conviction. Footballers are mercenaries - they play for the money but rarely out of conviction. Conviction usually means strongly held views = about what ought to be done and how things should be done. We derive emotional satisfaction from things being done in the way we prescribe. Not surprisingly church issues more readily become matters of high principle than in most organisations. Which means that people can be unwilling to modify how they approach things, leading to a degree of inflexibility and conflict. When all that is formulated in ethical and moral standards, it may give a clear guideline how one should behave, but should one fall foul of such rules then one can feel both failure and excluded.

In other words teams come with their own special challenges and from just my brief overview you can see why some prefer to remain individuals.

However, on the whole, I think teams are great –and being part of a church is better than not being part of the church.

Here’s why:

*Because it’s not good to be alone.* We are essentially social by nature. To be human is to be with others. Our quest for God is communitarian. Church is a walking to God in community. We wouldn’t find faith unless it was for the church keeping it going and passing it down to subsequent generations. Humanity as a family is inclusive enough, but is too abstract. The Church, infinitely more inclusive than blood family and infinitely less abstract than humanity - offers us a place to be with others. To join a church is to give up elitism and humbly accept your position in the family of humanity before God. Pele needs a team around him in order to shine. Teams can bring out the best in you.

*Because God calls us there*. The Holy Spirit is not a piece of private property, neither is God’s call. Spirituality is not a private search for what is highest in oneself but a communal search for the face of God. The call of God is double: Worship divinity and link yourself to humanity: love God and love your neighbour. To deal with Christ is to deal with his Church. I can call myself a football fan, I can have the scarf and the replica shirt and watch the programmes on TV –but if I don’t actually go the matches and actively support the team, am I a real fan? If my team have a big match on – I feel called to be there! (much to my wife’s dismay I may add!)

*To dispel my fantasises about myself.* The churches are compromised, dirty and sinful but, just like our blood families, they are also real. In the presence of people who share life with us regularly, we cannot lie, especially to ourselves, and delude ourselves into thinking we are generous and noble. Not being involved in the church because of the church’s faults is often a great rationalisation and an escape from admitting the pain of one’s own faults. Nobody deflates us more than our own family. I shouldn’t say that on Mothering Sunday – but I just have. The same is true of the church! But if you are committed to grow and mature in Christ this is not all bad.

*To help others carry their problems and to help them carry mine*. To go to church is to seek the therapy of public life and to be part of that therapy for others. It helps you carry what is unhealthy inside of you and helps others carry what is unhealthy inside of them. We buy into the worldly values of success. We want to be part of the church that is going places, that has the best music, the best preacher, and the youngest people – its church as entertainment. But that is essentially not what the church is about. You want to offer your best to God and be as attractive as you can be – I don’t want to justify mediocrity and complacency – but you miss the point if that is all there is. You can have the best stadium and the flashiest team strip – but if doesn’t happen on the pitch it all misses the point. Does this church lift the down trodden and help the broken – that’s the acid test of followers of Jesus.

*Because ten thousand saints have told me so.* I go to church because by far the majority of good and faith-filled persons that I know go there. It is the place where goodness and faithfulness is fostered. The saints of old and today are unanimous in the importance of the church. Because alongside the bad are the outstanding good – wow what inspiration some people of faith are. The writer of the letter to the Hebrews list some of them – those who ‘escaped the sword’, some were ‘slain by the sword’; some conquered by faith, some accepted suffering through faith, some shut the mouths of lions, some faced jeers and flogging, some were stoned and imprisoned – the writer of the letter says ‘we are not worthy of them’. I ponce around as a church leader, with a bit of a profile, and a big mouth at times – but I am not worthy of some of the pole of faith that I know – I think of those caring for elderly or disabled relatives, who maintain faith in a loving God despite their circumstances and I think ‘I am not worthy’. I think of those who give their lives away for others, those who live on very little, those who are persecuted and suffer for their faith –‘I am not worthy’. But this is the inspiration of faith. The great players of the past, the legends of the game that you want to emulate and follow.

*To dream with others.* 'What we dream alone remains a dream, but what we dream with others can become a reality’. Alone we are pretty powerless in face of the hurts and problems and hopelessness of the world. Together we can make a difference. Together we can continue the work of Jesus: healing, proclaiming good news, challenging injustice, bringing hope.

Someone once felt as though their dreams and faith had wilted. They had stopped going to church. They went to see a wise old Christian. They sat in front of a coal fire. The old man never spoke but went over to the fire and picked out a red-hot coal and put it on the hearth. Within minutes the coal lost its glow. When he put it back into the fire it began to glow again. The other man knew exactly why he had lost his vision and fervour - a Christian out of fellowship is like a coal out of the fire.

Team spirit is an infectious thing. Yes you can loaf around in a team and be anonymous but you can also find that the group effort is in fact better than the sum of the individual parts. People often try harder in groups, especially when they have defined responsibilities and know other people depend on them.. There is a buzz about working together towards a common objective – it’s a great way of forming meaningful relationships and often lasting friendships. You are not just good at something – you are good for something – purpose makes all the difference – faith in action. When we combine we can often achieve more

Think of our recent work together in establishing the Food bank.

*To practise for heaven. Hebrews text ends by saying these were all commended for their faith, yet none of them received what had been promised. God had planned something better for us so that only together with us would they be made perfect.* Heaven, so scripture assures us will be enjoyed by all sorts of people in a communal embrace. A universal heart will be required to live there. Few things stretch the heart as painfully as does a church community. It is a training ground for love, toleration and patience. Going to church is one of the better cardiovascular spiritual exercises available! Watching a football match can raise the blood pressure – but raising the blood pressure on an occasional basis can be good for you!

*For the pure joy of it!* Why do people play sport and go to sports events? Because they enjoy the ritual, the getting together, remembering the past glories, hoping for new ones, being connected to each other and despite everything that is not perfect, there is deep joy- it touches the emotions – it matters-it’s life

Olympians could fill a pool with their tears, on a quadrennial basis. The nature of the competition ensures that however many dream of glory, most will only experience disappointment. At that moment, the bitter taste not just of a single defeat but of four years of wasted effort can simply be too much for some to handle. More than that, quite a few athletes [can't even win without tears](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=p_fvrG3f0fI#t=6m35s). But no Olympic emotional outburst is ever likely to dislodge Derek Redmond's in the minds not just of Britons but of anyone old enough to remember the 1992 Games. What made this moment special was that it brought into focus not just the near-heroic desperation of a single professional athlete but a much more universal theme: the nature of parenthood.

Redmond’s career was affected by injuries. He failed to finish the 400m final at the Olympics in Seoul when he sustained an Achilles problem and four years later, when the same happened in the semi-final, there was hardly a dry eye in the house of 65,000 spectators. Redmond was looking to progress into the final of the 400m at the Olympic Games in Barcelona. Along the back straight, his hamstring snapped and Redmond halted, falling to the ground, before pulling himself up, determined to finish the race. His father had been watching from the stands close to where the drama had unfolded and, dodging his way past officials, he jumped over the railing onto the track to help his son, chased by two security guards. Redmond did not know who it was before insisting he has to finish the race Jim Redmond replied: "If you are going to finish the race, we will finish it together.“ With his dad ensuring he kept his balance, arm in arm they made their way around towards the finish line. “I'm the proudest father alive," said Jim. "I'm prouder of him than I would have been if he had won the gold medal. It took a lot of guts for him to do what he did.” Redmond said later: "I don't think I've ever cried so much in my life. It's more embarrassing than anything else-men don't cry."

Church is never going to be perfect it’s made up of imperfect people. But we get to carry each other over the finishing line. This race is not so much about competing against each other as it is about running together with each other. It’s being part of a team!