

Sermon

Introduction

So tomorrow is a day I have been looking forward to for a long time. It sees the start of one of my favourite occasions of the year. I am of course referring to 'Wimbledon'!

From 11 O'Clock tomorrow morning, we will be served up two weeks of, not only, top class tennis; but many moments of deep drama and high excitement; and the rollercoaster of emotions, ranging from elation to despair; and those player challenges, when the graphic comes on to show if the ball is in or out. Winning something like Wimbledon, takes a lot of hard work, mostly done behind the scenes sacrifice and much commitment.

And the rewards for those who do win include having their names etched forever on the winner's board and into Wimbledon history; the considerable prize money; and also being rewarded with a magnificent trophy.

However, I have always found it interesting that shortly after the winner has been presented with the reward of the trophy, they have to give it back, and instead they get a miniature copy.

Service

In the reading from Matthew's Gospel, Jesus has just finished teaching the newly selected group of twelve apostles about the rewards *they* will receive; but also about the challenges they will face, as he sends them out in the service of the Kingdom of Heaven.

He doesn't hold back and they are left in no doubt that to be sent out to do His work will be tough. They are given very clear instructions that require obedience and commitment; there will be opposition that will have to be met and overcome; there will be sacrifices that will have to be made. It would be quite understandable if they ran in the opposite direction.

However, Jesus also promises them they would be rewarded – and unlike the trophies at Wimbledon, His rewards aren't just given to us for a few minutes; they are eternal.

Challenge and Reward

For anyone who puts themselves into God's service, challenges and rewards go together. I'm sure as we think back over some of things that *we* have been sent out by God to do, I wonder if you, like me, can remember the sense of trepidation, the feelings of inadequacy and the worry about failing.

But also I wonder if, when you have taken that step, committed to the task and taken the risk; God has met you as you have done so and helped you accomplish it. And with that sense of accomplishment comes the huge rewards of a deepening of faith, a growth in confidence and a sense of fulfilment that comes only when we know we have been obedient to God and served the cause of building for the Kingdom. These then are rewards which are not separate from us but become part of us.

Good and bad rewards

But today's other readings also contain warnings about the kind of rewards that we don't want!

In St Paul's letter to the Romans, he is spelling out that despite the free gift to us of God's love through grace, we can't just do whatever we want. It isn't an excuse to live our lives in any old way we choose - because there are so many pitfalls and dangers; so much that we could get wrong and which leads, not to life in its abundance as comes with obedience to God, but to spiritual death.

And this is where we all need the help of others: people in whom we trust, people to help us to discern and work out what it is that God longs for us to do in God's service. This is one of the reasons we come together as a Church community, to do just that.

The reading from Genesis offers us a warning here. A traditional reading of this story is that this was a test of Abraham's *faith* – was he really willing to sacrifice his son Isaac, because he believed this is what God's willed? And only at the last minute did God intervene and call it off. But another way of looking at it is that it was a test of Abraham's *discernment*. The writer J Middleton suggests that Abraham's correct response would have been to plead for Isaac in the way he did for Sodom a few chapters earlier. Eventually, Abraham did hear God's voice and Isaac was saved.

I wonder what would have happened if Abraham had have asked his wife Sarah, how he should respond to the 'test' that God had set him? Perhaps it would have prevented this and kept the family together.

So we are reminded here how important it is that we in the Church are not only constantly listening out for God to call us into service but also that we discern together the best way to respond. The purpose of the challenges that God sets us are always designed to bring rewards of life, not death.

God's Reward

The reward that Christ has in store for those who do respond to His call obediently, and with wise discernment, is something way more precious than any reward the world can offer, whether that be money, power, fame, status, or even one of the trophies awarded the winners of Wimbledon, or any other sporting contest.

For us, now, when we have given of ourselves and brought God's love into the world – there is a sense of fulfilment and joy that is so pure that it can only come from God. And of course, most of this work is done not on centre stage but in places where only those willing to be sent, go.

But for us now, it is impossible to truly understand the wonderful nature of what Christ's reward will be; therefore for all of us who feel compelled to service and obedience, let us look to our faith to assure us that, in the words of St Paul: "What no eye has seen, what no ear has heard, and what no human mind has conceived", the things God has prepared for those who love him"¹ Amen