

Sunday 10<sup>th</sup> February

Nehemiah 2:11-18

1 Peter 2:9-10

John 20:11-18

It's that time of the year when many of us are glued to our television sets on Saturday afternoons (and sometimes Sunday afternoons like I will be today) watching six nations rugby. Hugely entertaining stuff – even for those who, like me, don't claim to understand the laws of rugby. I admit that much of the time I am at a loss as to what's actually happening. And I certainly don't know why referees make some of the decisions about offside or coming in at the side or other such finer parts of the laws.

But I am always amazed and impressed by the team work of rugby teams. Much more so than football which can often seem like eleven prima donnas battling it out to see which is the most overpaid. Or even cricket where there doesn't seem to be the same level of mutual dependence.

Each player has a defined role and position. Even for someone like me who doesn't understand everything about what is happening it's plain to see that each knows their position and role and what's expected of them. Defensive lines are straight lines; the full back always seems to be in the right place to catch the opposition's long kick; the wingers stay where they should be – on the wing – to receive the ball and be given the opportunity to run forward to score the try. And in the scrum each player knows exactly what to do – in a safe way as each player's safety depends on the other players' performances.

And just looking at the team – we see huge burly players in the scrums; a diminutive scrum half whose task it is to distribute the ball quickly and accurately when it comes out of the scrum; a wily fly half whose central role is to direct the play and the players and ensure that the most is made of every opportunity that arises (and who is usually very good at kicking for goal). We see a line of speedy and agile half backs and wingers whose skill is to run with the ball past the opposition. And, as mentioned, a full back who plays behind the rest of the team, always on the look out for the long kick and having safe and secure hands to catch the ball.

Each with their own role; each with skills and abilities that match the role; and each with the humility to realise that it's often someone else who's in the better place to make the score. But each also who is on the look out to back others up and make themselves available to support. Each one with a different job to do; but each one indispensable. Which is why for rugby teams losing a player and being down to 14 can be much more difficult to handle than a football team dropping from 11 to 10. Because in the rugby team there will be a critical deficiency in some department.

Today we are thinking about the church both here at (St Johns/CTK) and across the Parish as a team. You may have noticed that I'm not wearing a clerical collar or robes today. (at CTK nor are Gill or Graham or Denise or Pat). This not to say this will be the case each week – robes are part of the tradition here – but its to make a point – illustrate if you like – that actually we are all in this together; we are all part of the team; we all have unique gifts and skills and abilities and aptitudes ; we are all different in what we can do but equal in value. And together we can become something bigger and better than we are as individuals. Together we can achieve more. Together we can grow.

Now I can understand why this talk about growth, about sharing our stories and perhaps talking to friends and neighbours about what we believe and about inviting them to church or other events can be a bit scary. You might be thinking something like – well all that sounds great; it would be wonderful if we (ie someone else but not me) did invite their friends to church; it would be brilliant if we (ie someone else but not me) did share their story. It would be wonderful if we (again someone else but not me) did answer their neighbour's difficult questions about life and set them thinking about God. But I can't do that. It's way outside my comfort zone and beyond my capabilities.

Well that's fine. We are all different. Asking you to do things you're not suited to do is like asking the scrum half to be a prop forward; or asking the second row scrummer to run nimbly down the wing to score a sensational try. Or to take another analogy which might resonate more with you. Its like asking the percussion player in an orchestra to play the solo part in a violin concerto. An orchestra, like a rugby team, depends on people with distinct and different skills and abilities playing together to make a wonderful sound that none could make on their own.

The growth agenda that we have been talking about is about the church, us – you and me – together making a beautiful sound which can attract people to come and listen and inspire them in their lives. Its about making that sound which none of us could possibly make on our own, but which together can lift us and others onto a different plane.

In the Bible Paul talks about the church being like a body – each member of the church, each of us, like different parts of the body which together make up the whole. He talks about different gifts that people have, not for selfish satisfaction but to build up the church; to work together, to allow the body to function as a whole.

Our Old testament reading is from the book of Nehemiah. He was serving the King in Susa, in modern day Iran, when he heard news of the state of the city of Jerusalem. He realised that something had to be done, the walls of the city needed to be rebuilt, the people needed to be given hope. So he returned and our reading shows him in Jerusalem, seeing for himself the size of the rebuilding task, then calling the people together and sharing his vision. And we read that the people caught the vision and said "Lets get building" and we read they committed themselves to the common good.

But as we read the book further it becomes clear that different people had different roles to play in the rebuilding. Some laid stones, while others stood guard protecting, and others

supported the work in various practical ways. But they all worked to achieve the vision. Each using the skills and abilities given to them.

And in the NT reading – from the first letter of Peter – we have this amazing statement that we are a chosen race, a royal priesthood. Priests were the intermediaries between God and the people. Priests were the ones God spoke to and the ones who were allowed into the holiest place of the temple. But now says Peter to a group of Christians spread throughout the middle East, but now you are a Royal priesthood. You are all priests. There is an equality of status that was new and exciting and life changing.

Perhaps we in our church structures have taken that wonderful truth away. Perhaps we have – either by intention or accident – reintroduced those hierarchies which can lessen peoples value in their own minds. Remember we are a royal priesthood – that includes you and me.

Where does that leave Peter and myself then? I believe we are leaders like the leader or maybe conductor of the orchestra, like the captain of the rugby team. The one who coordinates and guides and encourages and inspires. The one who can influence tactics and methods; the one who can create and maintain the ethos and approach of the team or orchestra. But not one on a different level or of higher importance. And not one who can do everything. Just like the conductor cannot play all the instruments, or the rugby captain cannot play in all the positions, we are not super human. We have skills, aptitudes and gifts, but there are plenty of things that we can't do – but together as a team we as a church can do them.

Yes there are some things that we do that others cannot do according to the traditions of the church, but they are differences in function and task not in our own value or importance.

And so to our final reading, the gospel which might appear to be a rather odd choice. Mary Magdalene meeting the risen Jesus. The first person to do so. Jesus chose to appear to a woman – and remember all the cultural traditions of the role of women at that time. A woman's evidence was not allowed in court; women were seen as mere possessions of their husbands; women really were second class citizens.

But Jesus chose to appear to a woman. And he gave Mary the task of sharing her story. The story of her encounter with him – risen from the dead. Note the words. Jesus said "Go to my brothers and say to them". And she did – she announced to the (male) disciples "I have seen the Lord" and told them that he had said these things to her.

Mary was probably daunted by this; but elated by the news of Jesus risen from the dead. But she was given the confidence and strength to do it. She had a story to tell and it needed to be told. She rose to the occasion.

And that can be true for us. Maybe as we've already thought we might be daunted by some of the things we have spoken about regarding growth. Maybe we feel as we have said that we can't talk to friends and neighbours. But certainly we do all have a story. A story that is

unique to us. And it is possible that – even though it might be something you’re not comfortable in doing – there could be a time when you feel it’s right and necessary for you to tell your story; when you simply feel that for some reason you must say something. So perhaps it might be worth thinking about what you could say about your own faith and experience of God.

So in summary – we would do well to think about our own gifts and abilities and strengths. If you’re not sure what they are ask someone who’s close to you and who you trust to be honest and tell you. Sometimes its easier for others to see them than for us to. And then thank God for them and offer them to him for him to use to grow his church. And if you feel your gift is not being used, or that you haven’t even shared it in the past, have a word with me so that I can help you in putting it into practice for the good of the whole church.

And as we think, we’ll pray the prayer suggested in the booklets we received last week (plug them if people haven’t got them) for us to pray at weekends.