

Sermon for 3rd Sunday of Easter

John 15:1-8

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Out of Form

Have you ever followed a favourite team in any sport? I used to follow Aston Villa many years ago and could probably still give you the names of their players when I used to go to every home football match. I even came to Hereford to watch them play here never thinking that I would ever live in Hereford. One of the things that you do when you follow a sports team closely is spend hours talking about who is in and out of the team. Who should be picked in this position and who is hopeless playing in that position? You argue about the managers and their decisions as to the team make up. Endless hours of argument and discussion with other fans. No names, but I know a vicar's husband who can spend quite a long time talking about a strange football team from a little further North in England.

Who plays a sport now? Do you take it very seriously and play for a team or a club? Bowls? Golf? Tennis? You may be a more thinking person than an athlete and belong to a quiz team. Some of you might still be youthful enough to play team sport – I am jealous of Ruth because she has just started to play netball. I don't think I could even trot onto a pitch these days let alone run around it, although I did used to play Rugby when I was younger. If you do or did play for a team or a club, have you ever been left out of the team? How did you feel when you found out that you hadn't been chosen?

Quite often we have a greater and exaggerated opinion of our own abilities. Sometimes we have a true self opinion. (For example, I know that I am by far the best preacher in our benefice ministry team, but I don't boast about it.) If the team captain or manager comes to a decision that another person is a little better than you, is in form when you are going through a bad patch, then you may lose your place in the team. It can really knock you when this happens. It is a challenge to the picture of yourself that you have built in your mind. We build a self-image, sometimes called our ego. When you are dropped from a team, it shows that other people can think things about you that clashes with what you believe about yourself. It challenges your ego. It is extremely hard sometimes to accept that a judgement of you does not match your understanding of what you are and how you do things. It can make you look very deeply inside yourself, and make you re-build that self-image, that ego, to be a closer match to other's opinion of us.

Being Judged

Judgements of our personal performance which are that we are below the required level of performance and the standard of behaviour that is required can have serious consequences. If you do not reach the standard that is necessary to do a profession or job, then such a judgement can result in the loss of your livelihood. One of the hardest things that I had to do as a police supervisor was to have to make the decision that a probationer officer in my unit was unable to reach the required standard of performance. He was a lovely man but just did not have the necessary skills and abilities to serve as a police officer. I can still remember the questioning in my own mind as to whether I had made a fair and true judgement.

Sometimes our personal behaviour and the judgement that is made about it can result in consequences far wider than just losing a livelihood. The behaviour of an individual can have an affect on the whole of a society or group. A police officer in the USA made a decision of what level of force to use on a prisoner. He made an incorrect decision, and

now Derek Chauvin, the police officer from Minneapolis is awaiting sentence for the murder of George Floyd.

Consequences of culture

Chauvin's decision was a personal decision but has resulted in the whole of policing in the USA being examined. The group of people that an individual lives with and works with come to accept an expected level of behaviour within that group. Culture is defined as the ideas, customs and social behaviour of a group or people. A group establishes the normal and expected response by its members to the world around it. Chauvin responded in the way that he thought he should do based upon the current police culture in the USA. The officers with him did not try to stop him but accepted and allowed his use of excessive violence which was also partly as a result of the current American police culture. This police culture is beginning to be seen as wrong by many people in the USA and indeed in the wider world. Many see it as being inherently racist. The level and use of force that has been accepted as normal by American police is being questioned, and unfortunately for Derek Chauvin he is the officer that has acted as a catalyst in this process.

Our church is also being examined in its cultural response to racism. Last week the BBC showed a Panorama programme of examples of racist behaviour within the church, which was critical of the Church of England's record of dealing with members of ethnic minorities. Also, last week the anti-racism task force set up by Archbishop Justin reported. Archbishops Justin and Stephen have accepted the content of the report. The report states "This is the culture change that is required if the Church is to live up to its mandate of being a body where all the gifts of all its people flourish to the full, for the benefit of the church as a whole, the nation of England and the greater glory of God."

Culture and me

Our culture is made up of the decisions, beliefs, and customs of each one of us. Our culture is based upon how we as individuals behave. If we need to change our church culture, then we all need to change. If a member of an ethnic minority is made to feel unwelcome by one person in one of our congregations, then there is a danger that the whole Christian church in this country will be labelled racist.

In our gospel reading from John, Jesus states that God will examine us to make sure that we live as God tells us to live. Just as a captain or sports manager will drop a player who is not performing, Jesus says that God will cut out from the body of the church any of us who are not performing to the that level. It must be hard for God to do this as he loves each one of us. Just as a good sports club gives extra coaching to a player who is trying but has problems in specific aspects of play, God through his love for us will cut away those parts of us that are not growing properly. We must be prepared to examine ourselves, put our egos to one side, so that we accept and acknowledge when we have failed to live as Jesus teaches us to live. We must be prepared to let God prune those bits of us which do not bear fruit. If we all did this, then we would naturally have a 'God culture' rather than a racist culture. If we don't do this, then we must expect God to cut us off from Him and his church. Let's all look at ourselves and see if we can identify which bits of us God needs to prune. Then we will be able to produce the best fruit for God.