

FRIDAY AFTER ASH WEDNESDAY

There's a sense of excitement at the start of the season. The ground is prepared and marked out. The fixture list is printed. Everything is ready. So along you go for the first match.

But imagine what it would be like if, just before the game was due to start, the coach came onto the pitch and began to point to people in the stands — people who had come as spectators! 'All right: you over there, come on; and you in the blue jacket, you too; and you there hiding near the back, I want you in the team . . .' You begin to be afraid you might be next. Suddenly the people who've been called are hurrying down to the field of play, and the game begins.

Of course no serious sports team today would do it like that — or, if they did, they wouldn't win many matches. But this is the strange thing. When God came back at last, coming to establish the rule of heaven here on earth, that seems to be exactly how he went about it. Lots of people who thought they were just spectators suddenly found themselves summoned onto the field of play. As the story goes on, we find out that they, like modern spectators dragged from the stands and made to play the game, were not as ready, or as fit, as they might have been. But it seems that that's how God wanted to work.

There's something going on there which gets near the heart of the challenge of the gospel for us today. It's very easy for people to imagine that they can be 'religious' — they can say their prayers, they can go to church, they can read the Bible — but basically they are looking on, spectating, while God does what- ever God is going to do. And of course there's a sense in which that's true. God is not weak, helpless, waiting for humans to get their act together before he can do anything.

But in another sense part of the point is that God always wanted humans to be part of the action, not just spectators. God made humans to reflect his image — his presence, his love, his plans — into the world. That's why he himself came into the world as a human being. And that's why Jesus called Peter, Andrew, James and John, and the others. They weren't ready. They weren't expecting it. But that's how Jesus worked then, and that's how he works to this day. Perhaps that's why you're reading Matthew's gospel right now. Perhaps Jesus is going to point to you and ask you to help him with some of the work.

Of course, there were still quite a lot of people who remained spectators. As Jesus went about healing people — which was the most dramatic way of showing them that 'heaven' really was taking charge on earth — it was natural that great crowds followed him from all over. But here's another challenge. What should the church be doing today that would make people realize that 'heaven' is actually in charge here and now? When we find the answer to that question, there will be lots more spectators — and, we may hope, lots more players too.

TODAY

Gracious Lord, help us to be ready when you call us to work with you.