

WEEK 4: TUESDAY

The game was nearly over, and neither side had scored a goal. The spectators were getting angry, and the players were exhausted. One player on the home team, in particular, had worked tirelessly the whole game, running from end to end, always in the right place, wearing himself out to stop the opposition getting through, then launching counter-attacks. Again and again he gave of his best, but the rest of the team couldn't translate his efforts into an actual score.

With five minutes to go, the manager decided to try something desperate. He took the key player off, and brought on as a substitute a fresh, bright young man who had only played one or two games at the top level. Almost at once the ball came his way. With devil-may-care youthful energy he weaved his way through the defence and scored a great goal. The crowd went wild. The opposition caved in. The game was soon over.

The young man was cheered to the echo, carried around the stadium by happy fans. Eventually the older player, who had worked so hard throughout almost all the game, came out to join the party. A mixture of emotions. He had done all the hard work, and the other man, who had done none of it, had got all the glory.

That's the story Jesus told, only in a different setting. We don't so often have day-labourers lining up, waiting all day to be hired, and then paid at the boss's whim. But what is the story about?

It illustrates what Jesus had just said, which he was to repeat at the end: many who are first will be last, and the last first. As so often, this has at least three levels of meaning which we should explore.

To begin with, Jesus was facing his followers with the fact that God remains sovereign over his whole kingdom-project. Nobody can claim a special place either because they've worked hard, or because they've given up so much, or because they were in it from the beginning.

This is a warning to the disciples themselves, who, as Jesus' closest friends and associates, might well have supposed that they were going to retain the top jobs in whatever future God had in store. Jesus does indeed indicate that they will have special places (19.28) — though since he mentions the twelve of them, and since we know that Judas then defected, we should be careful not to build too much on that either. Later on in the chapter the disciples show how much they need this lesson, as James and John try to make sure they are the first in line.

But, second, the message goes wider, right across Matthew's gospel, in relation to the place of the Jewish people within God's larger purposes. Jesus has made it clear, two or three times, that ancient Israel has a priority. He has honoured that. As St Paul says, the gospel is 'to the Jew first'. But the gospel is not only for Jews. As Paul goes on, '— and for Gentiles also'. That was bad enough for the pious Jew to contemplate. But now there was a sense, following some of Jesus' earlier sayings, that the 'obvious' people had had to go to the back of the queue. This was not only humiliating. It might have looked as though God had changed his mind.

Jesus was quite clear. God hasn't changed his mind. It was always his plan to humble the

exalted and exalt the humbled.

The third level, then, reaches out to us in our life of faith today. Our western 'celebrity' culture favours those who manage to push themselves to the front, whether it's the people with the most obvious talents or the stars with the sharpest agents. Sadly, that can spill over into the life of the church: famous preachers and leaders get attention and the 'ordinary' Christian becomes a passive spectator. We need, again and again, to learn that there are no such people as 'ordinary' Christians. In the 'renewal of all things' which Jesus spoke about (19.28), all sorts of people will stand out as the real heroes and heroines of faith, though nobody has ever heard of them before. They will be the ones who, whether for five minutes or fifty years, served God with total and glad obedience, giving themselves completely to holiness, prayer, and works of love and mercy. Such people are the pure gold of the church. But, as so often, gold remains hidden and takes some finding.

TODAY

Gracious Lord, help us to be humble enough to take whatever place we are given, and zealous enough to work wholeheartedly for your glory where and when you call us.