

Sacrificial Acts

Philippians 2:1-13

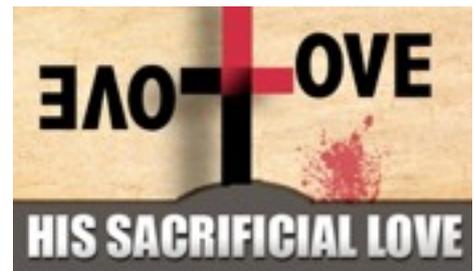
We have just experienced the week of weeks in Melbourne. The city turned various shades of brown and gold, red and white, as we counted down the days, then the hours until the ball was bounced and the grand-final commenced. Yesterday one team or another gained the glorious prize, while the other is nursing the wounds of defeat. But even for the victors, this win has not come easily and the glory road has been tough.

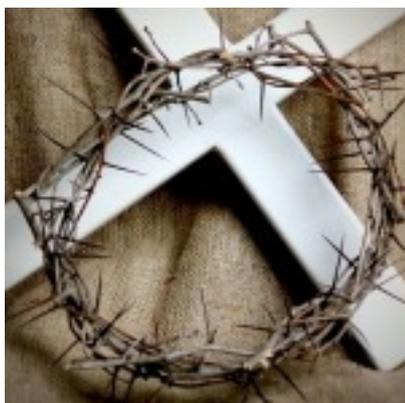


We often notice the spectacular things, the high marks, the goals kicked from the boundary line 60 metres out, but these aren't the things that have brought the team to the apex of football success. Football coaches like to speak of sacrificial acts, those small but immensely significant things that contribute to success. Where a player throws himself at the boot of an opposition player to smother the kick; where a player runs flat out for 25 metres just to provide a contest for a mark; where someone shepherds another player off the ball so that his teammate can have a clear run. These are the mundane things that contribute to success, to the ultimate glory of a grand final victory.



The words of St Paul's great Christ hymn are strangely appropriate on this day of post mortems about the game of games. The winning team is basking in one of sport's great glories. The city is captivated. Yet despite how important football is to this town, and the adulation that follows those who play and those who win, this is nothing compared to the glory of Jesus, at whose name "every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father." This glory will one day be acknowledged by all creation, and not just the church. But this universal acclamation has come at a huge price. Like a football coach who speaks of the importance of sacrificial acts, Paul locates the glory and honour of Christ in his supreme sacrificial act, in his willingness to serve, to do the hard things that speak of pain and humility. It is these things, culminating in the cross, that sets Jesus apart from those who want to walk the road to glory but don't want to get their hands dirty.





We know that there's much, much more to come. Jesus "humbled himself by becoming obedient to death, even death on a cross." This is the sacrificial act above all others. And it doesn't rank as the highest simply because of the cost, but also because of the result. Jesus himself became the sacrifice for sin, and he spent his whole life for us. The result is an entirely unexpected victory over the powers of sin, self and Satan. 'Every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.' An acclamation that far outstrips the honour of being the AFL premier for 2014. Glory that was won through service, not self promotion.

It has been said of successful football teams that the players would die for one another, such is the strength of their bond. Because of the way that God has called and formed us, the hallmark of the church is the willingness to sacrifice one's interests for the sake of the greater good. So Paul addresses us today; "Make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and of one mind." Or in the words of the Message: "Agree with one another, love one another, be deep spirited friends."



Sixteen teams fell by the wayside this year. Some could point to injuries, others to lack of talent. Others might have fallen prey to infighting among team members and the team administration. Arguments used the up the energy they should have invested in supporting one another, in playing according to the team rules and structures. Service gave way to selfishness, the team gave way to one's own terms and conditions. Like my club, for example, which just sacked its coach after an acrimonious end of season review.

The same can be sadly true of Christian community. Trust can so easily be compromised. Knowledge becomes power rather than insight for service. Love turns inward and our focus is on making sure we're comfortable, to the detriment of others. Eugene Peterson writes in his book *Reversed Thunder*: "Love cannot exist in isolation: away from others, love bloats into pride. Grace cannot be received privately. Hope cannot develop in solitude. Separated from the community, it goes to seed in the form of fantasies. "

Paul was well aware of the dangers when team play is replaced by a focus on the individual. He warns us: "Don't push your way to the front; don't sweet talk your way to the top. Put yourself aside, and help others get ahead. Don't be obsessed with getting your own advantage. Forget yourself long enough to lend a helping hand."



While we admire the gifts of individual players, especially the super-skilled, we are less well disposed to those who flaunt their talent at the expense of the team's greater good. The full forward who never passes to a player in a better position will get the reputation of a goal hog. Christian community is built on the foundation of God's gifted people sharing their talents, being comfortable, even rejoicing, in the talents of others. "The gospel pulls us into community...we instead of I, our instead of my, us instead of me..."

The last weeks have been sad ones for the St Paul's community, and

especially for the Cramer and Misso families. But the gospel has pulled us together to show our love in concrete ways: gathering together to share our collective grief, and comforting one another. There have been many other sacrificial acts: in the way that families and friends have cared for one another and showed love to the end, in the visits, phone calls, meals and especially in the prayers for each other. Sacrificial acts on the football field are often hands and knees stuff. So is sacrificial life in the Christian community. Each one of those actions comes from the heart of Jesus and displays his attitude of mind in action amongst us. They are often simple, they are always meaningful and together they constitute obedience to God's will.

May God continue to work in us to will and to act in order to fulfil his good purpose. Amen.