

Sermon: May 2nd Readings: John 13:31-35, Revelation 21: 1-6

I come from the land down under where cricket is the major national game. Those who don't know Cricket have great difficulty in understanding let alone following the game. They say it is too slow compared to baseball. Someone once wrote an explanation about cricket for those who don't know the game...

"You have 2 sides; a team that's in and a team that's out. Two men in the team that's in go out, and when one of the men who's in is out, the next man goes in until he's out. When they are all out, the side that's out comes in, and the side that's been in goes out and tries to get those coming in, out. Sometimes you get a man still in and not out.

There are two men called umpires who stay out all the time and they decide when the men who are in are out. When both sides have been in and all the men have been out; and both sides have been out twice after all the men have been in, including those who are not out, that is the end of the game."

That's the wonderful game of cricket. I miss cricket.

Recently some changes have been made to cricket. For some people these massive changes created an upset because although we were playing in the same oval, (playing area - ball park), same bat and ball; it was different and new strategies had to be learnt and new teams formed with players with the gifts, skills for the changed game. All rather confusing for both players and onlookers.

This upset and confusion was how the disciples felt after the resurrection of Jesus when they had to adjust, to adapt to changes, new teams and new strategies. The New Testament onlookers, witnesses, to these changes affirm the radically new era ushered in after the Easter event. The community who followed Jesus of Nazareth, the Risen Lord, found themselves in a new game plan that required new players and new strategies. It was a time of excitement and expectation; a time of rethinking.

None of the witnesses emphasizes the newness of the game any more strongly than the writer of the Gospel of John. This new

context is set between two dark episodes in the life of Jesus with his disciples. On one side: Judas has just gone into the night to betray Jesus of Nazareth - on the other side: Jesus predicts the three times of denial by Peter. At one of the darkest moments of his life and in his final conversation with his disciples, his team, John tells us Jesus speaks about his glorification: his return to the Father; the honour at the completion of his work. This moment of exaltation, honour and praise is set against the backdrop of betrayal and denials.

Into this moment of exaltation, denial, betrayal, there would also have been great confusion, for we are looking at a changing scenario as Jesus tells his team, the disciples, he is going where they cannot follow - yet.

This coming pain of separation, of change, of adjusting to the new is addressed with a reminder of their mutual relationship and responsibility in the community of faith. In these verses the disciples, during this part of the farewell conversation with Jesus, are given their new game plan in readiness for the time after his departure. Whilst the words are familiar to the disciples, it is a new command because Jesus' presence and action gives to them a fresh intensity and sharpness. A new and unparalleled model for love is handed down: "Just as I have loved you - you are to love one another." In Jesus the disciples have a concrete, living expression of what love is. Love can no longer be trivialised or reduced to an emotion. Jesus with his death and resurrection has become the distinctive and definitive definition of love.

However, Jesus' love for the disciples not only provides love with a new model it also inaugurates a new era. The future is in the now. As the writer of I John expresses it: "I am writing you a new commandment that is true in him and in you, because the darkness is passing away and the true light is already shining." The New Testament tells us The Kingdom, the Reign of God is with us now but the day of its completion is yet to come. The language of this Kingdom is Love, the behaviour: Love.

Such is the new game but what about this new team: Saul who had been pursuing the Christians with murderous intent is converted and is now on the team. What a shock it would have

been to everyone to now have Paul with them rather than so intensely in opposition - This was one of the great turning points in the history of the church. Last week we looked at The Acts of the Apostles: Luke's understanding of post resurrection events regarding the disciples going out in love to preach the Gospel which spread rapidly; the birth of the Church and development of the community of believers. We read that Peter went to Lydda where he healed Aeneas and then to Joppa where he prayed for Tabitha/Dorcas. These healings spread through the countryside giving honour to the Risen Lord. But change is in the air!

We are told that Peter stayed on with Simon the Tanner which for a rigid Jew was unheard of because a tanner worked with the dead animal bodies and so was permanently unclean. This action by Peter seems to indicate he is starting to realise there is a new thing coming. And it comes with far reaching effects.

Acts 10 describes how great the change and its effects would be and how the team of missionaries, evangelists, and the early church would have to adjust to cope with it. This story in Acts 10 of the coming into the church of Cornelius also constitutes one of the great turning points in the history of the church.

Cornelius was a Roman centurion, a courageous leader, and a devout Gentile. And that is the change! He is a gentile, a man seeking after God and God comes to him through a vision of an angel who tells him that his giving to the poor and his prayers have found God and he is to send for Peter in Joppa. Whilst the men he sent were on their way to Joppa, Peter goes onto the roof of the house to pray. He falls into a trance and sees a sheet descending from heaven containing all kinds of four-footed animals, as well as reptiles of the earth and birds of the air. He is told to "Get up, Peter. Kill and eat." Peter replies: "Surely not, Lord!" "I have never eaten anything impure or unclean." The voice spoke to him a second time, "Do not call anything impure that God has made clean." This happened three times, and the sheet was taken back to heaven.

While Peter is pondering the meaning of the vision, the men sent by Cornelius arrive. Peter is told through the Spirit: Do not hesitate to go with them, for I have sent them." Peter talks with

them and the next day Peter travels with them and some of the believers from Joppa to Caesarea. Peter and the Centurion meet and Peter goes inside where a large group have gathered. He said to them: "You are well aware that it is against our law for a Jew to associate with a Gentile or visit him. But! God has shown me that I should not call any man impure or unclean. So when I was sent for, I came without raising any objection. May I ask why you sent for me?" So Cornelius relates all that has happened.

Peter begins to speak: "I now realize how true it is that God does not show favouritism but accepts people from every nation who fear him and do what is right. He speaks to them of the good news of peace through Jesus Christ, who is Lord of all. As Peter is preaching, the Holy Spirit fills all the listeners. The Jewish believers who had come with Peter were astonished when they hear them speaking in tongues and praising God. They were baptised and Peter stayed with them for a few days. And so the Gentiles enter the Kingdom of God. Remember, we are the Gentiles.

Going back to my initial imagery, the explanation to the old team about the expansion of the team to include these new players does not come easily, and, understandably they are reluctant to welcome the new comers. With Paul, well, he was a Jew: for the Jews, it was their teaching that any other nation was outside the mercy of God. The new era was being ushered in - man-made walls were crashing under the power of the Risen Christ.

Nevertheless in spite of the tensions, the changes that were happening so quickly, the players in this new game with its new teams and new strategies played with persistence and commitment. The new commandment to love given by Jesus is the strategy and the foundation to their persistence, commitment - transformation and growth. But, there is something else that continues to call them on ---- that continues to call us on: In this reading from Revelation we are drawn into the coming new world - the fulfilment of the new era; the place where Jesus returned to and he is preparing for those who love.

Here we have a beautiful depiction of that which is to come - the new era in its completion. It includes all creation now restored; a place of security, of shalom - peace with justice; sorrow is to be forgotten; sin is to be vanquished; darkness will be at an end. It promises the doom of the wicked and the overwhelming joy of the blessed. This is what the prophets Isaiah, Haggai, Ezekiel have spoken of; Jesus refers to and is now glimpsed by the writer of the book of Revelation.

This is the dream of the Jews that has never died. This is the promise of Jesus and thus the promise for all. Here is the promised fellowship of God - the goal of our high calling! "I shall be your God and you shall be my people" (Jeremiah 31)

But, while its promise is in our midst, it is till not yet ... we are to be about this game. Whilst I have used the metaphor of a game, it is not a game to be taken lightly. This is our reality and we are to be taking it seriously. We are to be professionals. The disciples were serious about being about their Father's business ... about continuing the task, the commission handed onto them by Jesus during his final conversation with them. They knew what needed to be done and they went about it with a concentration, with a clearly defined strategy and focus. And they nurtured their teamwork through the model of love handed onto them by Jesus of Nazareth. They set their eyes toward the goal of their high calling and they pressed on with the transformation of their own lives and in their life together as the community of the Risen Christ, the people of God. Can we do less!

In the game of cricket, the very best one can do is to hit a six ... a ball hit out of the oval. It is the same with baseball ... a home run hit out of the ballpark. Let's play the game we are called to with energy, zeal and pride. Let's hit those sixes and homes runs and keep our eyes on that great day acoming!

AMEN

