

Matthew 13:24-30 World Cup

The psychology instructor had just finished a lecture on mental health and was testing his class. Speaking specifically about manic depression, he asked, "How would you diagnose a patient who walks back and forth screaming at the top of his lungs one minute, then sits in a chair weeping uncontrollably the next?"

A young man at the back of the class raised his hand and answered, "A football coach?"

Sounds about right and how many football coaches must there be who are thoroughly depressed at the moment? It was only a month ago today that South Africa kicked off against Mexico; the beginning of 32 teams pitted against each other and here we are down to the last two; the Netherlands and Spain – by the end of today only one of them will be able to call themselves champions. One winner, 31 losers.

But a month ago the field was wide open, some teams looked less likely to progress through the stages, but all teams were full of world class players, we had no idea that it would play out like this.

Jesus once told a story, (we actually heard it last week) about a farmer who sowed some seed – as it landed on the ground some of it was snatched away by the birds, some landed on the rocks and never grew, some was choked by the weeds around it, but other seed landed in good soil and flourished and we've seen all those things in South Africa.

Look at Ghana – they had a real chance to get through to the semi-final, but their chance was snatched away from them by Uruguay with a hand ball incident in the goal mouth which frankly made Maradona's "hand of God" tactics look like an

innocent mistake. It was just like the seed which the birds snatched away before it could grow.

Then there was England, what a non-event we were! We just never got going, no passion, no pride and I'm afraid, certainly no glory. Just like the seed which landed on the stony ground and which never amounted to anything – it withered and died!

Then again, at least we weren't the French! All their selfish pride and infighting as they enjoyed the luxury lifestyle – what a farce they were! They defeated themselves, just like the seeds choked by weeds.

And then here are the Netherlands and Spain, they have quite literally kept their eyes on the ball, they have trained, worked hard, worked together and it is all bearing fruit, like the seed in the good soil.

Now, the story Jesus told was to illustrate what happens to the message about God in the world – there will be some who have it snatched away from them like Ghana, some who never bother about it, like England and some who behave just like France, distracted and weighed down with worries and selfishness. But then there will be those who listen to the coach and who put themselves wholeheartedly into his hands just like the Netherlands and Spain and who reap the rewards.

But so what? So what if you don't win this time, there's always the next World Cup; come on England let's get it right for 2014, or 2018, or 2022... You see in the World Cup you get another chance every four years.

But, with God, things are a little different. Jesus, still using farmers to illustrate, goes on to talk about a field which is sown with wheat but where an enemy also sows weeds.

The owner of the field has a choice; get rid of the weeds now, or later. So what does he do? Well, he says, “No.” why? “because,” he says, “while you are pulling the weeds, you may root up the wheat with them. Let both grow together until the harvest.”

Now, although anything could have happened, at the beginning of the World Cup you could, in all fairness, have rooted a few teams out – let’s be honest North Korea were never going to win were they? But the weeds Jesus is talking about were called Darnel, they looked exactly the same as wheat.

But it isn’t just the difficulty in distinguishing between them that is the problem, Darnel’s roots go down deeper and stronger than wheat and so if you dug out the weeds, well, you might also dig out the good wheat.

In the same way, if you had removed North Korea from group G, then you would have had to remove a whole host of other teams from other groups to make the structure work and maybe you would have lost the Netherlands and Spain in the process, after all, neither of them have ever won the World Cup before, so there would be no reason to assume that they would this time. What a tragedy that would have been.

No, in Jesus’ story the farmer (who represents God) says, “At [harvest] time I will tell the harvesters: First collect the weeds and tie them in bundles to be burned; then gather the wheat and bring it into my barn.”

You see today might be Judgement Day for the Netherlands and Spain, but the Bible reminds us that we will all face a day of judgement, either when we die (Hebrews 9:27, “man is destined to die once, and after that to face judgment”) or when Jesus returns and that’s when God will sort us all out.

Let me read you what Jesus says will happen, you can find it in Matthew 24:30-31, ““Then, the Arrival of the Son of Man! It will fill the skies—no one will miss it. Unready people all over the world, outsiders to the splendour and power, will raise a huge lament as they watch the Son of Man blazing out of heaven. At that same moment, he'll dispatch his angels with a trumpet-blast summons, pulling in God's chosen from the four winds, from pole to pole.”

Did you catch that? One day there will be an incredible blast on the mightiest Vuvuzela, you won't miss it, it will knock you off your feet and then Jesus will return, not like the England squad returned home, not even like the Netherlands or Spain will return home, but more majestic, more glorious, more awesome than anything we can imagine and that's when he will gather together God's people.

Well, good for them.

Is that how you feel? Perhaps you think; “I'm not particularly religious, I try to be good, but how can I be sure that on that day I'll be OK? What can I do?”

Well, listen, if that is your question, I've got good news, because you can't do anything. How is that good news? Let me explain.

What has been one of the biggest disappointments of this World Cup? It's been the star players not performing. England are (in theory) good – but we need Rooney to do his stuff. Brazil are good – but they needed Kaka to work his magic. Argentina are good – but Messi just didn't come up trumps.

These teams, full of world class players might have tried their hardest, but they just couldn't do enough without their star players.

And we might be a good team of people, we try to be good, care about other people, do the right thing, even be religious, but we can never be good enough, we can never qualify with God on our own because no matter how good we are, we can never be as good and holy and righteous as he is.

In so many ways we reject him and ignore him and hurt the people and world he created. We deserved to be eternally sent off or disqualified by God.

So what did God do? Something amazing. Instead of punishing us, he sent us a star player, the greatest star player, some one who would come down and play life's game amongst us, some one who wear our colours, get dirty alongside us, someone who would even endure the most brutal opposition and the most appalling lack of respect, but who never backed down, never underperformed and would never fail us. That star player was Jesus Christ.

This morning I'm stood in front of our flag. Let me tell you, even when our national team fail us, there is no shame in this flag because it is dominated by the cross of Christ – the greatest victory in the world. It's where Jesus suffered all those things in our place and was banished from God's presence for us. He paid the penalty for all the times we had ignored God or lived in a way which dishonoured him, but when he had served his time – three days in the grave, God raised him to eternal life and glory.

How long will we look back to 1966 – a victory tinged with the sadness that we have never been able to repeat it? It is a past glory that has to happen again some day, but we can forever look back on the Cross of Christ with praise because it was a once and for all victory for us which never needs to be repeated.

And that's why there is nothing you can do to earn a place in God's team, because in Jesus it has already been done, you and I just need to believe in what he has done for us and make him the captain of our lives.

And if you do, do you have to stop enjoying football?
No, just make sure you don't put it on a pedestal above God.

Do you have to live life to the full?
Yes, live it for the awesome God of the universe now and for all eternity, because when the big Vuvuzela sounds or the final whistle is blown in your life then you can be confident that if you have lived for God with faith in Jesus then he will gather you into his glorious kingdom for all eternity.

Listen, I am going to say a prayer and if you would like to join "God and His People United", then can I invite you to pray it along with me in your heart?

Heavenly Father, I acknowledge that there is nothing I can do to get eternal life. I have put other things at the centre of my desires rather than you and I deserve your rejection. I am sorry.

I believe that Jesus died in my place and has taken the judgement that I deserve so that I too can have eternal life. I accept your gift. Thank you. Amen.

Kaka famously wears a shirt under his national strip which has the words, "I belong to God" printed on it, the question is, who do you belong to for all eternity?

Amen.