

Sermon on Sunday 24 September 2023

by Geoff Oates, Lay Reader

(Readings: Philippians 1. 21-26 & Matthew 20. 1-6)

As rugby union and European soccer seem to be taking up so much of our attention right now, I'll start this morning with a story with a sporting theme. But this is sport as it used to be.

A few months back I shared a story about my old pal Billy. As you might remember, Billy was a boy who grew up in the Yorkshire Pennines some time around the middle of the last century. When Billy was a getting little bit older, just after he started at secondary school, he began to take an interest in football. And in those days, the young men from the little mill towns and villages in the hills west of Bradford mostly supported the quaintly named, utterly unfashionable Bradford Park Avenue. In those days, they played in the old Fourth Division, which for some reason we call Division Two now.

Their shabby old ground stood in a corner of Horton Park, badly in need of some paint and TLC. But to Billy and his mates, it was the best place in the world.

So, you can guess the excitement in town when, one year, little Bradford Park Avenue travelled down to the Hawthorns and beat the mighty West Bromwich Albion to reach the

Fifth round of the FA Cup. Who would they play next? There were no live television broadcasts or iPhone apps to spread the news then, so on the day of the draw for the next round, Billy and his pals rushed out of school to buy the local evening paper and - **yes!** – a home draw against Tottenham Hotspur.

Tickets went on sale at the ground at 9 in the morning the next Saturday. Well, Billy was determined to get a ticket, and so were his schoolmates. This was going to be the biggest day of their lives, the day Bradford Park Avenue would beat Spurs and reach the Quarter Finals for the first time since 1921.

So, Billy, and Albert and Fred and George agreed to meet at 8 o'clock on Saturday at the corner of Park Avenue, to be right at the front of the queue. Piggy banks were raided for thruppenny bits, and on a bitter cold, dark February morning, Billy was up long before daylight, mum thoughtfully made him some cheese and pickle sandwiches, and off he went on the 7.30 trolley bus down the hill to the City. Yes, we had electric busses then!

He met his pals right on time at the bus stop by the ground – but what a shock they got. The queue at the ticket booths already ran all the way along Park Avenue and half the way up Horton Road. They were nowhere near the front, they'd have to queue for hours. Billy, Albert and George weren't going to let that stop them, and they marched off up the

hill to find the end of the queue. But Fred didn't join them. The others did all they could to persuade him, but Fred decided he wasn't going to waste his Saturday standing in a freezing queue just for a football ticket – so he went back to the bus stop and went home.

Well, it was a very long cold wait for the three boys, even with their cloth caps and green and white scarves; but they cheered themselves up by playing marbles on the pavement, and swapping cigarette cards of footballers who played for much more important teams than theirs. They even shared their lunch together, at about half past nine. Billy cheerfully swapped his cheese sandwiches for pieces of pork pie and black pudding, and when it really got to lunchtime, Billy's Uncle Ernest happened to pass by, no doubt sent along by a worried mum, and gave Billy sixpence to buy some chips for his friends. That made Billy very popular. So, when they finally walked back to the bus stop clutching their little pasteboard tickets, 1/9d for the boys enclosure, the three lads felt they had had a great adventure together, and they made sure everyone knew about it at school on Monday.

I'm afraid they weren't very kind to Fred. Poor old Fred felt very left out – there were whispered accusations that he was a closet Bradford City fan - but he'd made his decision, hadn't he, and now he had to live with it. Billy had been friends with Fred for a long time back in Primary School and felt a bit sorry for him, but he didn't really want to say so in front of his new friends.

'See you tomorrow at the game,' the boys shouted to each other as they left school next Friday. Except Fred. And the next day, well before 3 o'clock, they were all there on the terraces with their scarves and rattles – and to their great surprise, a couple of rows in front, there was Fred as well. With adult tickets at an extortionate 4/6d, the match had never actually sold out. Fred's dad had gone along on Friday and bought one of the last tickets.

Albert and George were furious – 'What is he doing here? He wouldn't even queue for a ticket last week!' But Billy was just so pleased to see him. 'Fred, you missed such a wonderful day when we were queuing for the tickets – it would have been awful if you'd missed the game as well.' And Fred proudly showed them his new green and white scarf and even a matching rosette. Maybe there had been a last-minute conversion here?

I'll leave that story now and go back to the one Jesus told in Gospel.

What was Jesus telling us about the workers in the vineyard? How a farm owner came to the town market place early one morning and hired workers for the day to bring in his harvest. And how he came again at noon, and mid-afternoon, and even late in the evening to hire more workers – and at the end of the day he gave them their pay, and he paid them all the same amount, no matter if

they had sweated all day in the hot sun, or just turned up for the last hour in the cool of the evening.

And some of those who had worked all day were angry. It wasn't fair. They expected something extra. They expected special treatment. But God has a different idea of fairness. There is nothing he can do to reward those who have served him longest or hardest that he will not also give to those who turn to him with the last breath of their lives. He offers us his love, and he offers us the blood of His Son. These are not coins that can be broken down into loose change and allocated according to an hourly going rate of pay. For each of us, it is all, or it is nothing.

And if we understand anything of God's Grace, then how can we ever wish him to withhold the fullness of that Grace from any human being. As long as any human soul is missing from the Kingdom of God, there is something incomplete in our own joy. In the great stadium that is God's Kingdom, tickets are not offered on a ballot, the turnstiles are always open, and there is always room for more in the ground. The Kingdom of God never sells out. And like Billy, let's rejoice at every friend we meet there, no matter how surprised we might be.

And yet, perhaps God does offer us something more. The joy of knowing and serving Him sooner, and not later. The day's work in the vineyard, no matter how hot the sun, is surely a more fulfilling way to spend our time than idling in

the marketplace – just as Billy’s long cold day with his friends in the queue for tickets was as much a part of the great adventure of that cup tie as the game was itself.

We too have the joy of waiting together in fellowship, tickets in our pockets, confident of all that God is going to do for his people. What a shame it is for all those that are missing out on that fellowship. Preachers have told us often enough that it’s never too late for any man or woman to turn to Christ – but, just as important, it’s also never too early to start enjoying the life of His Kingdom. Get yourself off to the vineyard!

By the way, Bradford drew 0-0 with Spurs that day, in front of 23,000 fans, but Spurs won the replay at White Hart Lane. Park Avenue dropped out of the league 50 years ago. But way down in the ‘Pitching In Northern Premier League’, Bradford Park Avenue are still there, and every Autumn they dream of FA Cup glory. I’m afraid they went out last Monday to Blythe Spartans in the 2nd Qualifying Round. But maybe next year? Watch out Spurs, we haven’t forgotten.

