

One of my January New Year decisions has been to cancel the Sky Sports subscription at home. I did so, knowing that there are many live sports fixtures on the doorstep here at school, every Saturday. Yesterday afternoon, I went to watch the first team play hockey against a local team. Up at the astroturf, the sunshine, blue sky and stunning view of the church we are now sitting in made a superb afternoon for the spectator on a wintry weekend. Downside won five-nil, with an excellent all-round team performance, and inspiring discipline.

Each individual player on the winning team was called and chosen, each marked out by the sign of the Downside cross on their shirt and shinpads. They became part of a spirit much bigger than themselves, a spirit that would achieve so much more together than alone. Their well-respected leader and coach gave encouragement, and an example to follow, as if the New Adam (as the Lord Jesus is sometimes called), a leader from within. At the request of captain and coach, the pre-match began in a similar way to this Mass, not by singing a hymn, but with a prayer, blessing and sprinkling with Holy Water. While this happened, all the members of the team united by joined arms and shoulders, knowing that they were in God's presence, and wanting God's strength and God's justice to unite them and to be reflected in their manner of play. Likewise, our altar server team, and our chorister team began in prayer this morning, in the 'pre-match' phase of this holy Mass.

That's Downside. And that's the life of our Church. Our gospel reading is a beginning of the formation of a new team. Jesus is beginning player selection for Team Christ. Great sports personalities sometimes have nicknames like the snooker player Alex 'Hurricane' Higgins, the footballer Vinnie 'The Enforcer' Jones or the sprinter Usain 'Lightning' Bolt. In this vein, John is called 'The Baptist', and St Peter 'The Rock'. Of course our own patron is St Gregory 'The Great.' Led by Jesus 'The Christ,' you and I, with our own unique gifts, are chosen and called. We come to belong to the team, by being joined to Christ for ever. By the pouring of water on the head, in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, we are called into the family of the Church. We are marked with the sign of the cross. It is called Baptism. Sunday Mass is like our team huddle, committing ourselves and given strength to carry out mission on the field of life's play.

Jesus 'The Saviour' Christ was baptised in the River Jordan by John the Baptist, 'The Trailblazer.' John had been baptising for some time, but Jesus changed the game by making the water holy and the baptism in Him. Like the team Head, we too are beloved by God, as we

heard on Thursday. We, the baptised, are the People of God, his team. And we are each inspired by the Holy Spirit at confirmation to carry out a different role for the team. Like the match I saw had solid defenders, creative minds in the middle, with ruthless finishers up front. God can use all these gifts for the Church, for the world, to *fulfil all righteousness*.

To be baptised is more than having a ceremony remembered in photographs, or a date written in a family Bible. It is to be named and claimed by God. Long before we decide anything about Him, God has already decided something about us. In baptism, God commits himself to us, and stays with us in the play of daily life. He calls us his beloved.

And like any team worth belonging to, there are no spectators. Some play visibly, some quietly. Some lead from the front, others hold the line. Some score the goals, others make the space in which goals become possible. What matters is our faithfulness.

Each time we gather for Mass, we return to the dressing room. We are reminded who we are, whose we are, and what we are sent to do. We are strengthened for the long match of daily life; in classrooms, corridors, common rooms, families, and friendships.

Beloved brothers and sisters: in half an hour, we shall be sent out again. The final whistle – or the organ voluntary – will not mark an ending, but a beginning. Marked with the sign of the cross, and strengthened by prayer, we go back into the world led by Christ from within, living what we have received here, and trusting that God is already at work in us, in the places to which we are sent. We are sent forth in peace ready for the ball to be pushed off once again.

St Gregory the Great, pray for us.