

## **Taking Up the Cross**

**Mark 8:31-38 [MW18-29]**

**Sermon preached by Rev Wayne Thornton**

**at Mangawhai and Wellsford, Sunday 16 September 2018**

### **The Superstriker Who Hung Up His Boots**

The nation of Palestine was dispirited and in disarray under the control of the Romans. But they had the chance to do something about this in the forthcoming cup-tie against the Romans. If they won it would give them a place in the finals and be a huge boost to national pride. Even more than that, playing well and beating the Roman Raiders would give Palestine a chance to stage the World Cup Soccer Finals. What a shot in the arm that would be for the national economy. It would raise the country's profile and encourage tourism - all sorts of benefits would follow.

The trouble was, the national team really did not stand a chance against those well-drilled and highly experienced Romans who had already taken the world by storm. The Palestinian side needed someone inspirational. Someone who could lift them out of themselves. Someone who could make chances and score goals. In short, they needed a "Superstriker". But there was no-one, and there seemed no possibility of finding one before that all important clash with the Raiders from Rome.

In Jerusalem the Sellout Sadducees and the Phabulous Pharisees had the whole soccer administration tied up. They only seemed to be in it for the money. There was intense rivalry - no sport. Winning was the most important thing - no matter how.

In the smaller villages things were in a bad way. If there were any good players, they were stolen away without fair compensation. There were no competitions and no fields. There was no money or equipment. There were plenty of children keen to play, but they were denied the opportunity. Soccer had been the national pastime, but things were not what they used to be.

There had been someone who tried to do something about it - John O'Baptist was his name. He was an unusual sort of guy - had a strange diet and way out training schedule. But he was a pretty fair

soccer player. He called people away from Jerusalem out into the soccer wilderness. He said the game and the people were important.

However he made the mistake of speaking out against the way King Herod organised his team. Herod bribed some officials and had John banned for life. Even this did not keep John O'Baptist from speaking out about the one who would follow. A player of such skill and talent. A truly gifted person whose boots he was unworthy to clean.

This was the situation into which that enigmatic character called simply "Joshua" came. Apparently he had never even put on soccer boots until he was thirty - too busy helping in his father's carpentry business. I think he had a try out with the Nazarenes. The Nazarenes were impressed but threw him out because being the son of a carpenter, what did he know about soccer and how it should be played!

After that he went around the towns and villages of Galilee - coaching, playing with the youngsters, helping to mark out fields and set up teams. He even provided some equipment. Just how he managed that no one really knows.

Joshua raised a few eyebrows and caught a few eyes. He must have shown a lot of promise because talent scouts from the great rival clubs in Jerusalem - the Sellout Sadducees and the Phabulous Pharisees - kept coming down and trying to sign him. They had some fierce arguments about how the game should be played and organised; and about why Joshua was doing what he was doing, and with those people, who surely did not matter very much. He always had an answer and usually managed to make those pompous city officials, who thought themselves so high and mighty, look quite foolish.

Stories about this "Joshua" began to spread. Especially when picked up by the sportswriters who wondered if this could at last be the long awaited superstriker. The one who could turn Palestine's soccer future around and give Palestinians something to cheer about - and perhaps most importantly defeat those Roman Raiders in the forthcoming cup challenge.

Joshua's fame spread before him. Although he was not actually playing any soccer, crowds gathered wherever he went. They listened to what he had to say and some even tried to follow his ideas about soccer organisation and playing. In his coaching it was obvious that he had great skill which could not be kept secret. In fact he was a person of exceptional talent and character. There was something out of the ordinary here.

Soon Joshua had gathered a small band of followers to help in the work. None of them were known soccer players. They made their way towards the capital, Jerusalem, stopping at all the small towns and villages on the way. Sports commentators and others who watch such things began to get a little excited. It looked very much like Joshua was on his way to Jerusalem to offer himself to the Palestinian national team in the coming cup tie.

About half way there, Joshua left his followers and the crowds and went for a long walk alone. When he came back he asked his followers: "Who do the crowds say I am?"

They replied: "Some say that you are John O'Baptist. Some say you must be an expensive transfer player. Others say you must be one of the great superstrickers of history come back again - Moses, Sampson, David."

"What about you?" Joshua then asked his followers. "Who do you say I am?"

They replied that of course he was the Superstriker, the one specially blessed. Joshua nodded his head, but asked them not to tell anyone; and especially not to speak to reporters. They asked him if he was going to play for Palestine against the Romans. Joshua smiled and said nothing.

In a small rundown village on the outskirts of Jerusalem, Joshua stopped his followers. There, on a patch of bare rocky ground marked with sticks, a group of barefoot children were playing soccer. Their ball was many layers of cloth painstakingly stitched together with scraps of leather. It did not look like much, but they were having fun.

Joshua and his friends watched for a while. "Hey! Do you guys want to play?" came an eager young voice. They mixed themselves into two teams and enjoyed some of the best soccer they had ever played.

Afterwards some of the children passed the ball around, waiting for their mothers to call them. Joshua sat with his friends in the late afternoon sun. "What difference would it make to them," Joshua said, pointing towards the group of children, "if I played for Palestine against Rome..."

"They would never see me play.

"They would never even get close enough to get my autograph.

"How would it help them and all the other towns and villages, all the people we have been with in the countryside. Would it give them playing fields? Would it give them equipment? Would it give them proper organisation and coaching? Would it spread the game to those who would benefit from it - but yet know nothing of it?"

"Of course it would be alright for me," Joshua continued. "Everybody wants me to play in Jerusalem. That is what seems best to those who are supposed to know. It would pay well and I could live comfortably. I would be a popular hero - as long as I was scoring goals and winning games."

Then he looked again at the rocky field marked by sticks. "I have a vision, a vision of a way everyone can be a winner. That is why I am here. Not to get glory by being a national hero - but to support people and show them how to support each other."

The next day Joshua and his followers entered Jerusalem to a tumultuous welcome. Crowds of people had gathered. They cheered and called his name, waving banners and flags. Some were so carried away they threw their team scarves and jerseys at Joshua's feet. His wide eyed followers joined the celebrations. But Joshua himself seemed almost oblivious, giving only an occasional wave or quiet smile. He went straight to the steps of the National Soccer Administration Building where he called a press conference.

"What I have to say," Joshua began, "will probably be very hard for you to hear. It is likely I will be misunderstood, rejected, barred from soccer even. You sportswriters will have a field day - wondering whether I have lost my nerve, or my skill, or cannot hack the pace; or whether I have been bribed or sold out to the Romans. But it can be no other way because I love the game and the people.

"If I play against the Romans the triumph will be superficial and short-lived. What ever gains were made would die with the end of my playing career. The way I have chosen, the results of what I have begun will be able to live and grow beyond me.

"If anyone wishes to come with me," said Joshua powerfully and carefully, "they must forget forever about a career in professional soccer. Forget about the glory and the glamour. Forget about the comfort and security. If anyone wishes to be part of what soccer really has to offer, they must hang up their boots and follow me."

A deathly silence fell on the crowd. Then there were boos, hisses, angry shouts, waved fists. You can imagine the headlines - and you know the rest of the story ...

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How could Joshua do this?

How could he turn aside from such a promising future?

Why did he not go the way people expected him to ?

Because he believed in the people and wanted them to know they were not on their own. He believed in what he was doing, believed in the spirit of the game.

If we think about Jesus and what happened, we could say that in a way Jesus gave up not only his life in his prime, but a shot at glory, a chance to do things his way - to call the shots, and to receive the rewards, now.

Jesus did that. Jesus followed that difficult path, taking up the cross, to show the full extent of God's love for us. God is right in there with us - supporting us in times of trouble and stress to be sure, but encouraging us also to go forward in following Jesus. To not only experience, but live out the supporting love of God in our lives.

We all have our own ideas, things that distract us, things that prevent us giving fully of ourselves. But no matter what, God loves us. God is with us, wherever we are, whatever we do. God's son, Jesus, came into our world so we would know there is nowhere we can go, nothing we can do, that will put us beyond God's care.

Jesus took up his cross so that we would know for sure that God's love supports us always. It is not just empty words, but a promise we can rely on. In relying on that promise of God, we discover the richness and fullness of life God has in store for us as individuals and as a community. So we are able to take up our cross and follow.

Follow knowing that while we are trying to show that same love of God in our lives - through our involvement with people and concerns - we ourselves are supported by God's love.