

When Matt Busby of Manchester United Football Club the eminently successful English professional football manager in the 1960s, was asked how he produced winning teams, he declared that any group of naturally endowed athletes could win more games than they lost if they concentrated on the “little things” of the game- the fundamentals. After a close game won by his “Babes” over the arch rival Liverpool, Busby called a special session for Monday morning because he felt his players were losing sight of the small details that guarantee victory. Appearing before his players, he held a football above his head and announced: “Men, we need to review the basics of the game. This is a football. Bobby Charlton so the story goes, said , “That’s a little fast Mr Busby. Can you go over that again.”

In the passage we read from the Gospel according to Matthew this morning, Jesus has gathered his team - his disciples - around him for one of the last teaching sessions of his career. Throughout his ministry he attempted to help his followers understand the meaning of the “kingdom of God”: what it is, who is in it, what is expected of people who are a part of it. He takes this occasion once again to clarify what it means to be a part of God’s kingdom. He returns to fundamentals, and in the process he helps us understand how the game of life is to be played. In order to help you remember the fundamentals of Jesus’ message in this passage, I offer them as **six Ss**, hoping the alliteration will aid memory.

One of the things he says as I mentioned last week is that **scrutiny** is part of the process. There comes a time when our conduct is subjected to judgment. He says that nations and people come before the king and there is a separating of people as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. The English priest and poet Studdert- Kennedy said that he once had a dream about this scene. In the dream he saw people coming face-to-face with Jesus, and he heard Jesus ask each of them one question: “Well, what did you make out of what was given to you?” Such a question would be a challenge to any of us.

However, the prospect of having to give an accounting of what we have done with the gifts God has given, can have a positive impact on our conduct. One morning in 1888, Alfred Nobel, the inventor of dynamite, the man who spent his lifetime amassing a fortune from the manufacture and sale of weapons of destruction, awoke to read his own obituary. The obituary was a result of a simple journalistic error - Alfred’s brother had died, and a French newsman carelessly reported the death of the wrong brother. Any person would be disturbed under those circumstances, but to Alfred Nobel the shock was overwhelming. He saw himself as the world saw him - “The Dynamite King,” the great industrialist who made a fortune as a merchant of death and destruction. This, as far as the public was concerned, was the entire purpose of his life. None of his other aspirations - to break down the barriers that separated people and ideas - were recognised or given serious consideration. As he read his obituary with horror, Nobel resolved to make clear to the world the true meaning and purpose of his life. And through the final disposition of his fortune, he established the most valued and prestigious prizes given to those who have done most for the cause of world peace, the arts, and sciences.

At some point in our lives, Jesus says, we submit to scrutiny and we have to give an accounting. Jesus goes on to say that the evaluation process elicits **surprise**. Those at the king’s right hand are told they have rendered service to the king himself. They are surprised and say they were not aware of it. The king says that when they were serving others, they were serving him. One day, we will be surprised to discover whose life we have impacted.

Note further that the story Jesus is telling is about **small** things. “I was hungry and you gave me food,” the king says to those on his right. For most of us, our opportunity to please God will not be the result of some benevolent act that impacts all of humanity. I was hungry and you gave me food... just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me,” says the king (vv. 35, 40). In small things love is revealed.

That love is also revealed in **simple** things. “I was thirsty,” says the king, “and you gave me something to drink” (v. 35). Showing that we care doesn’t require an elaborate system of social service. Long ago Muhammad said, “What is charity?” And then he answered: “Giving a thirsty person a drink, setting a lost one on the right road, smiling in your brother’s face — these things are charity.” These are the kinds of things that anyone can do. So often, because we can’t do something great, we do nothing at all. But there are kindnesses anyone can do. To do them is to walk the Christian way and in the end to win the approval of the king.

Obviously, this message of Jesus makes much of another “S,” **servicing**. “I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me,” says the king (v. 36). We are being challenged to do for others what they cannot do for themselves. Noted theologian, author, professor, and speaker Henri J.M. Nouwen made a move from the faculty at Harvard Divinity School in Boston to the staff at Daybreak Toronto - a residential community for mentally handicapped people. What a dramatic transition this must have been - from working with the world’s brightest and best under the spotlight of constant recognition, to labouring almost invisibly with people that the world would sometimes like to forget altogether.

Nouwen saw that most of his past life has been built around the idea that his value depended on his accomplishments. But sitting beside a slow and heavy breathing resident of Daybreak, he started to see how violent that journey was. So filled with desires to be better than others, so marked by rivalry, competition and superiority, so pervaded with compulsions and obsessions, and so spotted with moments of suspicion, jealousy, resentment, and revenge. In serving those who cannot help themselves, Nouwen heard the voice of Christ: “Just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me” (v. 40).

The final “S” is **sovereignty**. It is, after all, the king who says to those at his right: “Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you...” (v. 34). What Jesus was talking about is the kingdom of God. It sounds as though he is saying “Do these good things and you get in.” But that runs counter to so much that Jesus and the New Testament say about God’s gracious acceptance of us regardless of our merits. I think what Jesus is sharing with us is not a formula for how we save ourselves by our good works, but rather a description of how people who have pledged allegiance to Christ live out that allegiance. Acts of caring and compassion toward the least and loneliest demonstrate that a person is a citizen of the kingdom, even when they don’t realise what an impact their actions have. As we are involved in these little acts of kindness, we are helping to make the kingdom of God more visible.

Undergoing **scrutiny**, registering **surprise**, not overlooking **small** things, involving ourselves in **simple** acts, **servicing** “the least of these,” acknowledging God’s **sovereignty** - these are ways we come to recognise God’s kingdom and give evidence that we are part of it. In time, others will notice that the kingdom has come close to them. They may not know what to call it, but they will know something has happened that makes life better.

Fr Robert Newton