Sermon Notes on Hebrews 12 verses 1 – 6 'Goals win games'

We all know what Sandia's passion is don't we? If you said football, you would be correct but today we also want to say Jesus is too. All the years I've known Sandia my usual question to her when I see her is, did you score in yesterday's game and I would always get a response. It is true to say that it wasn't a bouncing around, singing and dancing response but at least it was a response. But singing and dancing is what today is all about and I hope that for all of us we may join in today's celebrations which is about a very different sort of scoring and victory.

Sandia's shirt is brilliant for describing the what and the why of today. Sandia's shirt is something she is rightly very proud of, because she was chosen to play for the Junior Blades. For very obvious reasons football is never mentioned in the Bible, ie it hadn't been invented yet, but sport, like today, was something which had penetrated very deep within Roman and Greek society. The sporting stars of the first century were the athletes which our reading refers to, but the true super stars were the Gladiators who fought in the arenas and whose stardom was very bright, if often very brief too!!

Here in Hebrews the metaphor used is the athletics race where the crowd are making a song and dance as they urge the competitors on to run the race well and to cross the finish line to win their reward. Today is about the start of the race, the pistol for Sandia has only just fired and she is on the first lap of many she will run. The crowd here are encouraging Sandia to run well and to run wisely for this race is not a sprint but a marathon and so she will have to endure until the end. For Sandia, and all of us who love and follow Jesus, is a race which lasts a lifetime where our eyes are fixed not only on the finish line but on the Guide who is running alongside us. What I am referring to is a Paralympics race where the runner, which is Sandia, is tied to an athlete who has no disability, but who enables the Paralympian to compete, to race well and to cross the line. Without the Guide the Paralympian would be unable to race. They would be unable to run in the right direction, to keep within their lane or know where the finishing line was. When I've seen such races what touches me the most is that during the race the Guide is always slightly ahead, but when the finishing line is in sight the Guide drops slightly back, thus enabling the runner to come first and so win the prize. I will come back to who this Guide is in a moment but first let's think about the shirt.

The amazing story about Sandia's shirt is rooted in her being headhunted to play for Junior Blades because of her ability to score lots of goals!! She didn't go and buy the shirt, she won the right to wear it and her shirt speaks of four things about baptism:

Firstly, Sandia was chosen to wear it. The shirt is all about the badge and all that it stands for within the club. To wear the badge is the biggest honour possible and all players respect a club's badge, you see that when they make sure, they never walk on any club's badge as that is the greatest dishonour. The badge that I am thinking of though isn't the cross blades, it is the cross as this is what this pool of water speaks of. It speaks of Jesus who willingly endured the horrors of the cross that he might triumph over the enemy, that he might wash us clean, that he might demonstrate all

that the love of God is, that he might pay the price and set us free that we might gladly join in the amazing story of God's plans and purposes.

Secondly, the shirt speaks of Sandia's readiness to play. The red stripes speak of the blood of Jesus which make us match ready and qualified to wear the shirt. This is because the blood of Jesus fulfils all the necessary criteria we need to wear the kit. The blood of Jesus covers our every sin, it makes us whole, it does everything we are unable to do, or, in other words, it makes us match fit.

Thirdly, the shirt reminds Sandia about the best way to play the game. The white stripes speak of holiness, or in other words of living in a way which shows Jesus. As a member of a team, you are chosen not only for your current ability, you are chosen also for your potential which your coaches can see and want to grow and develop within you. The Blades don't only want you to score lots of goals, they want you to become an even better striker so that you may fulfil the potential they see within you and so score more and more goals. For as Michael Owen said, 'Goals win games'. To be baptised is to say that from now on you're going to live the Jesus way, which is the best way for anyone to live. It is to live in a way which fulfils all the potential we all have as those who are made not just in the image of God, but who are also being made more and more into the likeness of Jesus.

Fourth, and finally, the shirt tells you Sandia that you are playing for the best team and thus the winning team. In other words, you have a guaranteed trophy. In baptism we are all reminded that because of Jesus we are guaranteed a trophy which Jesus will give to us as he says, well done good and faithful servant to us. This trophy is because we have kept our eyes on Jesus, it is because we have lived in the light of the red and white stripes and it is because we follow all that our coach says and does.

Today is a singing and dancing day and I want to draw it all together by reminding you about who the Guide Paralympian runners have is. The Guide might be Jesus, but I prefer to think of Jesus as the coach who is on the sideline and who can see the bigger picture. For me, I think the Guide is the Holy Spirit who urges us to listen and follow all that the coach says. The Guide is closer to us than anyone can ever imagine. He holds us and urges us always on in the race that we may finish it and take our place in the stands.

This is what baptism is about and the red and white life it speaks of. May we all wear the colours of Jesus, love and honour the badge, listen carefully to the coach, follow the lead of the Guide that we may all receive the reward of Jesus at the final whistle as he says to us all, 'well done good and faithful servant'.