

Reflection for the Eleventh Sunday of the Church's year

Another World Cup is underway. Scotland have their first match today and England on Wednesday evening. A great deal has been said and written about England's Manager Thomas Tuchel's choice for his twenty-six-man squad. Surprise both at who he has included and at some of the big names he has left out. It has been said that in previous tournaments England have taken teams sparkling with talented, highly paid household names who have failed to gel or bond as a team.

In the gospel today Jesus sends his first team out into the field. How did they get along and operate as a team? They are a very diverse and motley crew! We shouldn't underestimate what an eclectic, potentially incompatible, diverse group they were. We are introduced to them in pairs, and against some of the names St Matthew has attached a little nugget of information. Described as "*first*" by St Matthew, "*Simon, who is called Peter*" is presented as the captain. He is introduced with "*Andrew his brother.*" They were fishermen and along with fellow fishermen "*James, the son of Zebedee, and John his brother*" they have been with Jesus the longest. Next are "*Philip and Bartholomew*" who is sometimes referred to as Nathaniel. These appear to be more intellectual, to come from a Greek background and to have been followers of John the Baptist. Then we have "*Thomas and Matthew.*" Matthew is described as "*the tax collector.*" A brave choice on the part of Jesus as tax collectors were not popular figures and were thought to have sold their allegiance to the occupying Roman forces for whom they worked. Matthew could have been a potentially dividing figure, and it would be interesting to know how the four fishermen from Galilee reacted to his choice! The next couple named are "*James the son of Alphaeus and Thaddaeus*"; about these two we know next to nothing. And the final pair are "*Simon and Judas Iscariot*" both of whom are given additional descriptions. Simon is described as "*the Zealot*" and so had engaged in undercover insurgency to frustrate the Roman occupiers and even overthrow them. The Zealots did not stop at peaceful demonstrations but would use violent and guerrilla tactics. He appears to be a very strange choice and his relationship with Matthew, the collaborating tax collector, must have been interesting! Finally, St Matthew attaches a description to Judas Iscariot too; he is "*the one who was to betray*" Jesus, and so his character is presented as flawed from the very outset.

So, in his team Jesus has chosen a very eccentric mix of opposites with plenty of potential for personality clashes and incompatibility. However, from these twelve Jesus moulds the foundation on which he will successfully drive his mission to the "*harassed and helpless crowds*" who are "*like sheep without a shepherd.*" The labourers he sends into the harvest are hardly 'holy joes', hardly schooled in theology or religious teachers but he entrusts them with "*authority over unclean spirits, to cast them out, and to heal every disease and every affliction.*" Whether Thomas Tuchel's team selections will succeed we are about to find out. History, however, shows us that Jesus was able to mould his team into the very foundation of the church.