

Everybody wants to be a winner. It doesn't matter how much we tell ourselves it's the taking part that matters or that everybody who takes part is equally the star, or that losing doesn't matter; what we really want is the taste of triumph, the glories of victory, the laurel wreath of praise and admiration, the sound of cheers and adulation ringing in our ears. Who remembers the losers? Who wants to know the runners up? Who cares about those who go out in the first round, the quarter or even the semi-finals? Ask Jedward or the English football team.

No, what we want, is to win. What we want is Palm Sunday. Not today, Not, please God no, not Good Friday. Let us have the processions, the cheering crowds, the triumphant entries, the adulation, the songs, the shouts, the praise. Spare us the jeering soldiers, the crown of thorns, the terrifying walk to calvary, the nails, the humiliation, the pain, the loss. We want to be winners not losers.

But you are Christians. This day of utter desolation, this Good Friday, just as much as anything else is what being a Christian is all about. I'm sorry. You will always be on the losing team. You and your teammates will never be taking home the silverware. Even the wooden spoon is probably beyond your reach. Your horse will always fall at the first post, your tour operator will go bust just as your outward flight lands, you will always need a bail out but nobody will put their hands in their pockets.

The minute you clicked on the link to this church any hope of success was lost: you were on the downward spiral. You are destined forever to be kicking around the non-league, playing the working men's clubs and bingo halls, eking out your penury at Netto not Waitrose, forever waiting for the call that never comes, watching yourself passed over for promotion time and time again, endlessly at the back of a queue that never moves.

Everything you touch will not turn to gold, but dust. At least it will, if you are doing it right.

For centuries, there has been a terrible Christian misconception that doing well in the world means that God is giving you a helping hand, that he has decided to invest his capital in the bank named you, and conversely, the lower down the heap you are to be found, the further away from God you are. How could we ever get it so wrong?

If you are rich or successful or popular or well off or high flying VIP, if you are, in a nutshell, a winner, it's not, let us be absolutely crystal clear about this because there is something about you that God loves more than other people. It's not because you've kept God's rules better than anyone else, or that He helps those who help themselves. It's not that God smiles on good Catholics or good Protestants or Good Jews or Good Muslims and curses everybody else.

If you doubt what I am saying then let us move closer to Calvary, let us put ourselves at the foot of the cross, let us get right up close, smack bang in the middle of the action, right there where it's all happening. Come with me and take a good look at the cross and the man hanging on it.

Where are the riches in this scene? Look at the absolute cruel poverty of the cross. Jesus has lost everything: he no longer possesses even his own clothes. Soon, he will have his life taken away from him.

Where is the popularity in this picture? Most of his 'fans' have run away. The crowd that was waving the palms just a few days ago are now spitting and cursing. How fickle is fame. Even the lowest of low life dying with him mock him.

How, just how, is this a picture of success? Possessionless, powerless; mocked, hated, abused; every dream, every ambition, every aspiration, every hope torn to pieces in front of his face and trampled in the dirt. Naked, arms outstretched, hands and feet driven through with unforgiving iron, slowly suffocating in the pitiless furnace of the midday sun. The scene you see is not success: it is the epitome of failure.

Remember this, what you see now. Don't forget this scene. Sear into your heart this vision of failure. We know it ends in triumph, we know it ends in the victory of Easter morning, we know that the story's denouement is unimaginable elation; nevertheless this greatest of all human triumphs is the Triumph of the Cross— an unmitigated failure by every standard of this world.

To want to be rich, popular, successful is so universal, that we may start to think that this is part, perhaps, of our nature, part of what it means to be human. If that is the limit of our vision, if wealth, fame and success are the height of our hopes, if that is the extent of our humanity, then this, today, is where it ends, in this all too human scene, as one man is tortured to death.

But we *are* more. Good Friday is not the end of Christian vision but the start of it. With that crown of thorns, that hammer, those nails we have truly plumbed the depths of our depravity; the only way now, is up. If we are, as our faith tells us, the pinnacle of God's creation, then, we have only scratched the surface of what we can be.

So stop trying to win. Every victory, every single victory of this world is pyrrhic. In the light of Calvary they are shown up for what they truly are: insubstantial and illusory.

*'Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life.'*

Thus says the Lord.