

Hymns:     277    “**They rise, and needs will have**”  
              154    “**Come divine Interpreter**””  
              561    “**Now I have found the ground**”  
              564    “**O thou who camest from above**”

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Readings:  **Psalm 51:1-12**  
              **Hebrews 5:5-10**

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### ***“MELCHIZEDEK – WHO HE?”***

For the first time in its 237 years of glorious history, John Wesley’s pulpit is this morning occupied by a Couch Potato – a couch potato with eyes the shape of a rugby ball.

Yesterday I began watching those great rugby matches between Italy and Wales, Scotland and Ireland, England and France at 12.30pm and barely moved from my place until 7.00pm. I was glued to the television. A visitor called. He spoke endlessly about all kinds of noble and worthy things. We gave him a cup of tea. And all this without taking our eyes off the action. I even saw him to the door and, I suspect, rather pushed him out more quickly than he’d bargained for!

I’m telling you all this so that you understand that, when I speak about rugby, I speak as one having authority and not as the scribes and journalists. And I particularly want to mention one aspect of rugby which I consider to be its core activity. I’m referring to the energising and creative well-spring of the modern game. It’s the central feature of all attacking opportunities and it’s nothing less than “the breakdown”. When a ball carrier is tackled, laid low, brought to ground – only then do options become available. The man who’s tackled will try his best to present the ball to his own side so that others in his team can continue with any progress he’s made. But the opposition will make every effort not only to tackle him but to turn him over so that they can rob him of the ball and set up an attack of their own. In the broken play following a tackle, all kinds of things can (and do) happen.

It’s at the breakdown that a team’s ability can be best measured. It’s the breakdown that’s the key to understanding modern rugby.

I’m fascinated by this idea of breakdown. The word, at first sight, suggests failure or collapse, problems or the end of an endeavour. A car breaks down and you’re pretty fed

up. Someone suffers a breakdown and we all get worried. Peace talks break down and we wonder if they'll ever resume. All these uses of the word are negative. Sometimes, however, it's only when there's a breakdown that positive and previously un-tried possibilities emerge.

Jesus is called Melchizedek by the writer of this morning's New Testament lesson. It wouldn't take me long to sketch everything we know about this mysterious character who lurks in the deeper and more distant parts of the Old Testament. He appears twice. In Genesis 14:18-20 we read:

“And Melchizedek King of Salem brought out bread and wine; he was the priest of the most high God. And he blessed him and said, ‘blessed be Abram to the most high God, possessor of heaven and earth, and blessed be the most high God which hath delivered thine enemies into thine hand.’”

And then, in Psalm 110 verse 4, we read:

“The Lord hath sworn and will not repent: ‘thou art a priest forever after the manner of Melchizedek.’”

In Hebrews chapter 7, Melchizedek was “without father, without mother, without genealogy.”

And that's the point.

Melchizedek was never caught up in the regular priesthood of ancient Israel. The institution of priesthood was “created” on Mount Sinai – part of the deal forged between Moses and God on that holy mountain. This means that the official priesthood of the Jewish people did not come into being until generations later than the time of Abraham. So Melchizedek pre-dates all that. And he gets the title “High Priest” centuries before the first regular High Priest was named.

Religious and other bodies like to impose order on their affairs, and continuity is one of the most sought-after signs of authenticity. The historic episcopate is just one manifestation of this. The supposed unbroken line of bishops and priests ordained by bishops, a lineage that began in apostolic times, is a feature of some churches and the reason why they find it difficult to unite with others who lack this ancient manifestation. At Wesley's Chapel the nearest we can get is the line of engravings and photographs of the 59 Superintendent ministers who, in unbroken succession since the time of John Wesley, have held sway in this Holy place. On the secular side, the success of Hilary

Mantel's "Wolf Hall" is all about the necessity for a king to have an heir so that legitimacy can underpin the monarchy of England continuity again.

But Jesus stands outside such smooth and calculated arrangements. It's as if God is active at the breakdown. He forages and searches for a way to act within history in unpredictable and unconventional ways. Jesus is of the order of Melchizedek – not for him membership of some priestly order or some royal family. We could also note the way that God brought St Paul into the picture. Although he's frequently called an apostle, he isn't strictly one of the twelve whom Jesus called.

Jesus came from deep within the established order yet he stands clearly outside it.

I remember the fuss and bother that followed the announcement that Dom Basil Hume, Benedictine monk and Abbott of Ampleforth, was to be the new Cardinal Archbishop of Westminster. Where on earth did they find him? He didn't appear through conventional channels. No bookmaker laid odds on him. Yet this "outsider" became one of the most charismatic church leaders of modern times.

And I also remember the way David Jenkins, a Welsh tornado who'd been a professor of theology at Leeds University, was made Bishop of Durham. He was just sprung into that ancient diocese. And he shook the land with his utterances and obliged the nation to think about spiritual and theological things. Yet he too came from "nowhere".

And now we've got a man who once sold oil in Nigeria and who's been fast-tracked into Canterbury at the helm of our established Church. Once again, this unexpected appointment is proving to be rather good for us all.

All these people were a shock to the system. They came from unexpected places. Someone had been active at the breakdown, seeing creative possibilities in a time of change.

The trouble with our established systems is that they inevitably become "reductive" – they seek to perpetuate the status quo, to choose newcomers who meet the entry criteria. They all become members of a certain kind of "club". I must confess to having a horror of selecting people for employment. The whole process puts us under the tyranny of the Job Description and Person Specification. We all have to keep notes, give marks, compare our scores. Just think of the number of times you wish you could have followed your hunch rather than these prolonged and dubious methodologies. I sometimes wonder whether Jesus would ever have satisfied a selection panel.

It's the same in sporting endeavour. You find a youngster with flair, instinct, courage. You give him a coach and put him in some kind of sporting academy and, hey presto, before you know what's happening, all the instinctual brilliance has been coached out of him in the name of conformity and correct style.

In all these ways the idea of creative activity "at the breakdown" has been airbrushed out. We keep opting for the safe pair of hands.

I've been a fan of the writings of the Swiss Roman Catholic author Hans Kung for decades. His "On Being a Christian" puts things better than I can.

- Jesus was neither a priest nor a theologian. He didn't side with the rulers. He was never part of the establishment. He sought radical change.
- Jesus was never a member of the groups seeking revolution. People looked to him for liberation but he was no social revolutionary. He advocated non-violent activity.
- Jesus was never among those who sought solace in monastic life. He was not a religious. He was not for the elite but for all.
- Jesus was not a pharisee – the group that made a compromise with their political overlords. He was not a pious legalist. He was against self-righteousness.

On all these grounds, and for all these reasons, Jesus remained what Kung calls "provocative on all sides". He worked at the breakdown. He was not sucked into any system. He was always looking for new ways forward. He did outrageous things. He was always on the front foot, seeking to move forward. And Hans Kung concludes this section of his book (pages 177-213):

"He is on a different place: apparently closer than the priests to God, freer than the ascetics in regard to the world, more moral than the moralists, more revolutionary than the revolutionaries. Thus he had depths and vastnesses lacking in others."

Jesus had no power base and, being provocative on all sides, the day was always going to come when someone would say "Enough!" And set in train the processes that would get rid of him. On this Passion Sunday we catch sight of what lies ahead.

How many times yesterday, as we watched those 221 points being scored, did we spot what was happening, what was really happening. Again and again, the ball emerging

from the foragers and predators worrying away at the point of breakdown was developed by a fast-running ball-carrier who himself was brought low by his opponents – but not before he'd slipped the ball to a teammate running alongside him. The television cameras inevitably focussed on the beaming, triumphant features of the scorer. Out of the picture were the scrummagers and the play-makers without whom the final effort at the breakdown could never have materialised.

Jesus will soon go to his end, a death that seems more and more inevitable. But as he breathes his last, so too his followers can catch the flame, sense the forward surge, become part of the final shove over the line. "Another grim death for man, a giant leap for mankind."

Many of us have gazed in awe and wonder this week at the eclipse of the sun by the moon. None of us will need to worry too much about the eclipse, of the Son of God by the darkness of his impending death. The cross, of course, is the ultimate breakdown yet, as with the heavenly eclipse so too with the scene at Gethsemane, there will always be a bright halo around the circle of darkness, the darkness itself will only be a passing phase, and the light will emerge and regain its proper sway.

Thus spake the Couch Potato.

Amen.