

At the 10 am service on June 20, 2010, The Rev. Cornel Barnett delivered the following sermon:

“Jesus and the 2010 Soccer World Cup – Players to Watch”

Today I am continuing my sermon series on Jesus and the 2010 Soccer World Cup. Last week I spoke about coaching and how Paul in his letter to the church in Thessalonica was like a soccer coach in the way he affirmed and encouraged the church.

Today, the theme is “players to watch.” The title came from the San Francisco Chronicle double-page spread on the eve of the tournament kick-off 10 days ago. The middle of the page carried eight head shots of “players to watch.”

They are Kaka, from Brazil; Cristiano Ronaldo, from Portugal; Lionel Messi, from Argentina; Wayne Rooney, from England; Samuel Eto'o, from Cameroon; Gianluigi Buffon, from Italy; Franck Ribery, from France; and Xavi Hernandez, from Spain.

I'm surprised that Landon Donovan, from the USA, was not mentioned in the line-up. He is a player to watch. I guess the Chronicle listed what the world of soccer considers the *crème de la crème*, the absolute best, and they didn't see Donovan in that stratosphere. That's debatable. Donovan is really good as are many other players in the tournament which comprises teams from the top 32 countries out of 204 countries that competed.

The 2010 FIFA World Cup is a desert!

The reasons the Chronicle gives to watch these players are a little weak so I turned to other sources. The good news of the Gospel will come through my reflections on the players to watch.

The first is not on the list but he qualifies with his performance in his first game. He has become a player to watch in an unusual way. It is Robert Green, the England goalkeeper who fumbled Clint Dempsey's low, 25-yard shot into the goal. I've been impressed with most of what has emerged since the incident. It's been decidedly Christian.

One comment I did not like was at a graduation party shortly after the game. One person said: “This guy gets paid a lot and is supposed to be on top of his game. I would fire him and send him home.” This person did not know what it took to become the starter of one of the best teams in the world. He had a great track record. Why would we fire someone because he or she made a mistake? Imagine if God did that.

My reply to the critic was something like this: It is amazing that someone so good made a fundamental mistake. The best of us make mistakes. Green is probably his own harshest judge.

I could have added that we all slip up in a variety of ways and when we do, we recognize our error and seek God's forgiveness and we are assured of God's forgiveness and we move on. We forgive ourselves.

Green said the blunder wouldn't affect him psychologically. The Chronicle quotes him as saying: "I'm 30, I'm a man, and you have hardships in life and prepare for them. I'm strong enough to move on. At a younger point in my life it would have affected me more."

We get perspective when we are older but we are never too old to feel bad about something and we are never too young to accept forgiveness and move on.

The beautiful thing about this whole affair is that Green's team-mates forgave and accepted him. He already made a great save after the blunder and they wanted him to play the next game. The coach said he would speak to him and evaluate his readiness before he chose the players for the next game. It's about the best strategy.

The game took place on Friday and Green didn't play. He was on the bench and ready to play if called. God bless him.

This aside we go back to the *crème de la crème*.

According to the 2010 World Guide magazine, Wayne Rooney is England's striker extraordinaire. He has remarkable instincts and on-field intelligence. He has the ability to play anywhere in the attack and the grit and determination that binds it all. Imagine if someone said that about our faith,

In spite of all these amazing abilities, Rooney was shut out by the USA and Algeria. The best don't always shine. He has chance to rebound in the next game. In the Christian context we feel shut out from time to time, we feel pressure to give up, we get despondent and we lose our spiritual vitality. Soccer players get pumped up in a variety of ways. For us: it is support from family and friends in and out of the church, it's attending worship and prayer.

Lionel Messi from Argentina is regarded as the best player in the world. He's a goal-scoring whiz but amazingly every one of his shots at goal in his first game against Nigeria was stopped by an amazing goalkeeper Vincent Enyeama. However, it is a delight to see Messi in action just as it is a delight to see members of the church in action.

We act like the best biblical players to watch: Jesus and John the Baptist. Jesus is the Lionel Messi of the Bible. We also watch and learn from disciples, prophets and leaders like Moses and Joshua.

In the Gospel text today, John's disciples are sent by John to ask Jesus if he is the one to come or should they look for another. John hasn't seen Jesus at play so to speak. The plays are outlined in the text.

We read: "Jesus had just then cured many people of diseases, plagues, and evil spirits, and had given sight to many who were blind. And Jesus answered them, 'Go and tell John what you have seen and heard: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, the poor have good news brought to them.'"

In soccer World Cup terms, Jesus had done what he came for. He out dribbled his opponents, he displayed amazing gifts, he received and passed the ball and scored the key goals.

After this description of the best player to watch in the New Testament we have Jesus describing another best player: John the Baptist.

The text continues: "When John's messengers had gone, Jesus began to speak to the crowds about John: 'What did you go out into the wilderness to look at? A reed shaken by the wind? What then did you go out to see? Someone dressed in soft robes? Look, those who put on fine clothing and live in luxury are in royal palaces. What then did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. This is the one about whom it is written, 'See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way before you.' I tell you, among those born of women no one is greater than John; yet the least in the kingdom of God is greater than he."

Those who watched John perform knew that he was one sent by God, a prophet, and Jesus affirms his role as the one who prepared the people to receive him as the Messiah. There is not much take home material from John for our day. We know that he played exceptionally well in his day and set up the player of the centuries for us: Jesus who we do watch, learn from, appropriate, follow and play like him the best we can.

Finally, the Psalm for the day asks: "What are human beings that you are mindful of them, mortals that you care for them?" The psalmist replies: "Yet you have made them a little lower than God, and crowned them with glory and honor." Jesus states something like this when he affirms that the least in the realm of God is greater than John. That means all of us: We are great in God's eyes. Basically, our faith affirms the best in us and expects the best of us.

There was one soccer player who was literally seen as one removed from God. He is Pelé. He is not in this world cup but is still regarded as the best ever to play the game. Cesar Menotti, the coach who guided Argentina to World Cup victory in 1978, said of Pelé: "Pelé will only be surpassed if God starts playing football." That sounds like Jesus to me. Amen.