Getting Back On the Horse to Go Again

I’ve written so many of these columns over the last couple of years that I have forgotten whether I have ever railed against the seemingly ubiquitous football cliche ‘we go again’ which is uttered almost as a reflex by anyone associated with a football team at any level which does not win, it seems, these days. I was appalled to find that, as the dust settled on our defeat to Cheltenham last weekend, this was one of the coping mechanisms that fluttered across my mind. I can only apologise to all fans of Northampton Town. I didn’t want to turn out this way.

There are a lot of reasons why ‘we go again’ is a silly thing to say. Where are we going? It won’t be Cheltenham, at least not for a few months. If ‘we go again’ refers to trying hard to make up for it today, then that’s great, but what happens if things don’t work out this afternoon? Will we be going again, again? Winning has always been important in football, naturally, but I’m sure that when I was growing up watching football, I didn’t perceive quite the level of need to justify not winning a game. Seasons felt longer, then. A team found its level over a 46 game season rather than being judged on a couple of months, or even a handful of games, as happens in the higher echelons of the game these days all too often.

I find myself wondering if the way things have changed is in part because we as a society aren’t well-equipped to deal with disappointment. The reality of life is that alongside joy comes sorrow. Alongside happiness comes sadness. Alongside health, we experience pain. Losing is naturally around the corner when we are winning. In football, as in life, there is a time for everything (Ecclesiastes 3:1-8). You might disagree with me. Perhaps we are well-equipped for disappointment. Perhaps we just refuse to tolerate it. I’ve found that however often I’ve tried to outrun the possibility of things going wrong, eventually it catches up with me. You can be eight games unbeaten, as it were, with all the joy that brings, but that one defeat, the most recent loss, that’s the one that stays with you much more powerfully than the memory of success or the sense of thankfulness to those who have brought joy.

Perhaps you’re not like me. You’d be lucky if you’re not. I do wonder if we have a lot to learn from Jesus though who, when faced with the somewhat disappointing news that he was to be killed for trying to bring good things to people who weren’t used to it in his society (women, children, those who were poorer, those who found it very challenging to keep the rules but had good hearts) and to make up for the bad behaviour of others, still chose to trust in the direction that God had set him on and got back on the horse (it was a colt, actually, a small donkey) and rode in to Jerusalem to finish the task. He could have run away from disappointment and saved himself a lot of pain (which is quite an understatement) but he faced it. Where there’s disappointment, there is always the possibility of joy around the corner. I hope we share some today.

Up the Cobblers!