

St. Ninian's Parish Church
Sunday 20th January 2019
1 Corinthians 12: 1 - 11

I have a photograph from the summer of 2013 of my son Aidan at about 6 months old being held precariously beside a T.V. screen, and on the screen is Andy Murray holding the Wimbledon Men's Singles trophy.

Almost six years on, as his career draws to a close due to injury - this past week the three-time Grand Slam champion from Dunblane announced that he may have competed in his last tournament - many people including fellow tennis players, journalists, commentators, politicians and members of the public, have been eulogising his career.

Rightly so, Mr Murray has been an extremely successful tennis champion. His tally at the grand slams of 3 wins, 11 finals, 21 semi-finals, 30 quarter-finals, and 189 match wins rank among the top ten male players of the modern era.

Back in 2013 much of Andy Murray's career was focused on Wimbledon and contending with the pressure to become the first British man to win the tournament in 75 years. His cause wasn't helped by his struggle to beat the very best players at the time: he had already reached four Grand Slam finals, but had managed to win only one set.

So, winning that trophy was for nearly everyone who remembers that day in 2013, a very big event. Rightly so, after all is winning championships not what professional tennis is all about?

But, that photograph of Aidan propped beside the T.V. in 2013 was more than a photo of him beside the first Wimbledon British male champion in 75 years, it was also a photo of him beside the person, Andy Murray, a man who was on his way to becoming someone quite distinct from a tennis champion.

It took Andy Murray, the person, almost as long to win over the affection of the British tennis-watching public as it did to win a Grand Slam tournament. The year before his triumph, when he lost the 2012 Wimbledon final, he burst in to tears in an on-court interview.

That moment of emotional release became also a moment of emotional bonding and it was the start of a new relationship between Andy Murray and British tennis fans, one that would see him become not just the much-loved and respected person that he is today, but also Sir Andy Murray, someone respected by the tennis establishment that in his younger days had disregarded him and refused to fund his emerging potential.

Those tears in 2012, which began this new relationship, were spontaneous, they came from the heart, and they revealed something of the real person

that lay within this remarkably gifted tennis player. But, unlike his skill on a tennis court, those tears didn't come from a genetic disposition to be good at crying, nor did they come from hours of practice and years of dedication to honing his crying skills, they came from somewhere else, and they were transformational.

Consequently, as his career draws to close, it seems that it is only his on-court career that is coming to an end. In the years to come, he will surely become a gem in the commentary booth, an asset on any coaching staff, and an inspiration for grass roots development of British tennis. Most importantly, in the future he will be remembered as much for the kind person he was, as he will be remembered for the trophies that he won.

If you want to be a good tennis player who wins trophies, then good genes help, many hours on the tennis court, practicing, helps also, as does the right approach to diet. But, if you want to become a person like Sir Andy Murray who is more than just an on-court champion, but is admired by others because of his attitude to the sport, his attitude towards other people in the sport including journalists and fellow professionals, and particularly in his case, loved by women professionals because of his attitude towards them, then you need more than good genes, much practice, and committed dedication.

"You know how," wrote Paul to the Christians in Corinth, which we read this morning, "you were swept off to those dumb heathen gods, however you happened to be led," or as another translation puts it more clearly, "You know that when you were pagans, you were enticed and led astray to idols that could not speak."

Life lived as it should be in this world, life in all its fullness, is not all about trophies – idols that cannot speak - nor is it about how much you earn, how fast your car is, how big your house is, or what school you went to, that is to say, the things that can be acquired as a consequence of the fortune of our birth or the skills we develop through hard work. Instead, to find true value in life, it is equally important to include something else. For Paul, writing to the Corinthians, a life with true value is a life that includes gifts that are spiritual not just material or physical or inherited.

Throughout theological history, church leaders have emphasised that the gifts which people receive from the Holy Spirit are not 'birth-right talents', things that we receive as a lucky consequence of our inheritance, genetic or otherwise. Nor, theologians have argued, are these gifts of the Spirit acquired skills, they cannot be gained through hours of practice and dedicated training for example. They are, as they are called, gifts; things that are freely given.

I am not sure that this is entirely true; our genetic inheritance, the fortunes of our upbringing, our hard work and dedication are all so much part of our lives, how can we separate them all out? But, nevertheless Paul is right to call the gifts of the Spirit, gifts, because they are primarily the product of something else other than what we gain by our birth or from our acquired skills.

The gifts of the Spirit are those things that we discover about ourselves when we are prepared to focus not on what we are naturally able to do, or on what we want to achieve in life, or what we must work hard to gain, but instead they are what we receive when we focus on our attitude to life, when we focus on the spirit that we bring to how we live.

Gifts are revealed within us when we follow the course of a holy life. We become different people when we follow the course of a holy life. We discover we have gifts to offer the world when we follow the course of a holy life. When the Holy Spirit is present in our lives spiritual gifts are revealed within us.

Sir Andy Murray discovered that in the tennis world your standing is not just about how talented you are, how much you practice, and how many trophies you win; it is as much about what kind of spirit resides within you, what kind of attitude you have to the sport, to winning, to losing, and to other people.

That is true of all life and living, there is more to us than just what we have achieved in life; equally important is what kind of spirit resides within us and what we do with the gifts which that spirit reveals to us when we seek to live in harmony with it.

In pursuing the Christian life church members in Corinth discovered that they had a variety of different spiritual gifts within their congregation. We learn this from the letter we read, and we also learn that this congregation soon began to respect and honour some of these gifts above others – and so to respect and honour the people that had them above other people who had other, different gifts.

This letter was written by Paul to teach his fellow Christians that because these many different gifts came from the one God, so each of these gifts was of equal value to the other. Nor were these gifts given for the particular benefit of the one who received them, they were given for the benefit of the whole community.

Whereas in the temporal world the skills we gain or the birth-right we receive so often go on to stratify our societies and become the basis of how we value others – trophies, earnings, awards, prizes, honours – the gifts of the spirit, in God's Kingdom, should never be used in that way. Churches - Christian

communities - should value their members equally no matter what spiritual gifts they possess.

That was the purpose of this letter, and it is a lesson we should heed, but more importantly in this modern age, perhaps, is the indication that people have spiritual gifts given to them that are waiting to be revealed. We are not made up of just what we discover we have been born with, or what we discover we can acquire in life, but of equal value is what kind of attitude we take to life, what kind of spirit resides in us.

For a man in his twenties – perhaps particularly for a Scotsman in his twenties – who has dedicated his whole life to one goal, to be able to weep, as Andy Murray did when he lost in 2012 in front of 17 million people watching in the UK alone, and many more worldwide, was no small thing. It was a big thing.

It wasn't of course, as big as winning the title the following year. But, then in terms of his relationship with tennis and talent and the media and tennis fans, perhaps his spirit expressed in that outpouring of emotion was what made him the fully balanced professional he needed to become in order to win the final 12 months later. Perhaps also then, because of the emotional connection he made with others in 2012, when he became the Wimbledon champion 12 months later it was as much of a national triumph as it was a personal one.

The Christian life, as the Gospel of John makes clear repeatedly, is about living life in all its fullness. To do so we need to become fully balanced people, not just because it is good for us to do so, but because it is good for everyone in our society, our communities, our families. Becoming fully balanced people means not just making the most of our genetic and material inheritance, and of making the most of what hard work and dedication can bring in life, but also it means making the most of the spiritual nature of our existence: our attitude.

Living a life with a spirit of holiness, with a Holy Spirit, with a holy attitude reveals what lies deep within us, gifts that we didn't know we had or could ever have, gifts of the spirit, acquired through lives lived pursuing the spiritual holiness of loving respect for others, of peace - just lives, lived mercifully.

Now to the one who can keep you from falling and set you in the presence of his glory, jubilant and above reproach, to the only God our saviour, be glory and majesty, power and authority, through Jesus Christ our Lord, before all time, now, and for evermore. Amen.