

**Ambition aside  
25 September 2011**

**Philippians 2:1-11**

Whether we can't get enough of it, or would rather ignore it, we cannot hide from the Rugby World Cup.

My personal relationship with our national obsession has had its ups and downs. I have childhood memories of watching some of the first televised All Blacks tests with my father in the early 1970s and I remember being puzzled at seeing the All Blacks weaning white in one particular game against Scotland. While it didn't take me long to learn I had absolutely no talent whatsoever at playing rugby, that did not stop me from being a keen follower, especially when either Taranaki or the All Blacks were playing.

However, I became disillusioned with rugby during the 1981 Springbok tour, and to be an anti tour protestor in the provinces, like I was, meant inviting persecution. I took my stance so seriously that I watched none of the games until the second half of that chaotic final test at Eden Park. Even then, I pretended to be reading and not watching, while my father was glued to the telly, and I really struggled to remain poker faced when Allan Hewson kicked the winning penalty. I may not have fooled Dad, but I never forgave the New Zealand Rugby Union for the tour until I succumbed to the excitement of the first Rugby World Cup six years later.

I continued to follow rugby after our reconciliation, but some of its more recent developments have started to irritate me. I have never completely understood some of the laws of the game, especially the ones concerning what happens at the breakdown, and continual tinkering with the laws frustrates and confuses me. Also, I do not like

the way in which All Blacks have become something of a commodity; and frankly, I have found it off putting to have had to walk past a sixty foot high billboard of Dan Carter in his underpants on the way to work. The last straw for me has been the advertisement for the official deodorant of the All Blacks. I'm sorry, but could you imagine Colin Meads making a special effort to smell nice in the scrum? I don't think so.

I did not appreciate the saturation advertising during the build up to the Rugby World Cup, and to be perfectly honest, I was over it before it had even started. When it actually began though, I found myself hooked; and I have been watching almost every game I can. I despaired at Wales' cruel loss to South Africa; rejoiced at Ireland's upset win over Australia; and was glued to the All Blacks' trouncing of France last night.

One moment during the All Blacks' landslide victory over Japan last weekend really stood out for me. Despite the massive imbalance between the teams, I knew this was going to be an interesting game. A number of players, including captain Richie McCaw, were sidelined because of injury, so this would be an interesting new combination.

It was three quarters of the way through the game. Sonny Bill Williams had already scored one try and looked set to score another. He had a safe run ahead, and there was nobody to stop him, but just short of the line he passed the ball to Ma'a Nonu, and let him score the try instead. Sonny Bill could have easily scored this try, and he would go on to score again in the dying minutes of the game, but he let someone else have this one.

Sonny Bill's pass impressed me for two reasons. Firstly, it was an example of how the All Blacks were playing like a cohesive team and not like fifteen individuals. You would not have guessed the usual captain and several other usual players missing. Maybe Graham Henry's rotation policy was working after all?

Secondly, it showed that Sonny Bill was happy to share the glory with the rest of the team, and I was reminded of today's Epistle reading from Paul's Letter to the Philippians.

It would appear that ambition, desire for prestige and self interest were causing discord and disunity in the Philippian Church. It would also appear some things have not changed. I have no right to judge or question the integrity of any other minister of the Church, but I cringe when I see American style televangelists flouting their prosperity while asking for money, and I find myself asking what sort of image of the Body of Christ this presents to the world.

Paul tells us we should not act out of selfish ambition or conceit, but with humility, having concern for the interests of others ahead of those of themselves. He also reminds us how Jesus accepted human form and humility to the extreme of a suffering a degrading death; and I consider today's reading is not only Paul's clearest expression of how the human Jesus is also the divine Christ, it is one of the most important passages he wrote.

As with so much of the teaching in the Bible, this is not necessarily easy to put into practice. How do we know whether our enthusiasm to do God's work is a desire to do God's will or a desire to do what we want God's will to be. There is no simple answer to how best to discern

God's will, but I have found what works best is to seek through prayer and meditation to improve our conscious contact with God, praying only for knowledge of His will for us and the power to carry that out. I have learned to make this simple request the core of my prayer life: that God's will be done; and I am reminded of Paul's advice to be of the same mind as was in Christ Jesus.

Sonny Bill Williams' gift of a try to Ma'a Nonu was a powerful reminder of the unity and strength that comes when we put aside ambition, desire for prestige and self interest. When the Rugby World Cup is over, and when life has returned to normal, this one pass will be a standout moment for me, regardless of where the All Blacks ultimately finish.

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