

## **Giving thanks for the chance to meet a hero**

It was May 6, 2012, the 5<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Easter and I was taking the services in what the Church of England refers to as the most deprived parish in England.

St Peter's Blackpool on the Lytham Road is at the heart of the South Shore community serving the local community faithfully and with commitment. The organist of many years had been the churchwarden and was also the treasurer.

His wife sang in the choir and both had been St Peter's for decades. When I arrived at the Church I asked if he was going to be there, and was told, 'of course, he told us he wouldn't miss it for the world'. As if on cue, in he walked.

An unremarkable incident, until I tell you that the organist was Jimmy Armfield and the day before, on May 5, he had been presenting Chelsea with the FA Cup in the final at Wembley Stadium.

This remarkable player, both for Blackpool and England; in his day rated as the best right back in the world; successful manager at Bolton and Leeds and valued commentator and pundit had rightly been chosen by the FA to present the cup at the final.

Jimmy combined his brilliance at football with a loyalty to his adopted town of Blackpool and a depth of practical faith in God and Jesus which shaped all that he did.

'Seeing we are surrounded by so great a crowd of witnesses' is how the writer to the Hebrews describes the saints who encourage and show us how to live.

The athletic imagery continues, as we are told to 'run with perseverance the race marked out for us'.

Jimmy was one such person. He was one who gave totally of himself for others because of his faith.

Even driving late at night from the post-FA Cup Final dinner to Blackpool so that he could play the organ for the Sunday service.

Every conversation I had with him, he would be concerned about someone else, speak fondly of them and seek a better situation.

His support of people when they were becoming frail, from the likes of Sir Tom Finney through to neighbours in Blackpool was exemplary.

A true saint is not perfect, but one who shows to others the grace of God at work in them. For that I give thanks that I got to know the organist of St Peter's, my childhood hero, Jimmy Armfield CBE.

May he rest in peace.