

## The World Cup – Trinity 4 2010

I Kings 19 vv 15-21 p361, Psalm 16, Galatians 5 vv 1-25 p1171, Luke 9 vv 51-62 p1040

Psalm 147 v10: *He hath no pleasure in the strength of an horse: neither delighteth he in any man's legs.*

*Fifteen million believe* proclaim the posters on the railway stations. *Fifteen million believe* in a red cross on a white background. You have to admire their faith, hope and love.

World Cup fervour has seized the nation. Thousands of fans have spent thousands of pounds travelling thousands of miles on a pilgrimage to be there in person. Millions more watch on television, wherever possible with groups of fellow believers in homes and pubs and even school assembly halls. You can watch on your own, but supporting a team really has to be a shared experience.

No expense is spared in the desire to participate. World cup barbecues unite groups of friends in a common meal. In bars, rounds of drinks, bought for one another, shared with one another and downed together are both a sign and a seal of belonging to that body of faithful fans who will follow England to the final whistle.

People so much want to show their support, to be numbered among the faithful, that all kinds of merchandise with a world cup theme just flies off the shelves.

Money is no object. Older fans might grumble that it costs a lot more to go to football now than it did when they were young, but they know that they have to be realistic. It costs what it costs and, if you think it is worth it, you pay what the clubs demand.

Fans loudly and unashamedly proclaim their identity as England supporters. Flags fly on homes and cars. People pay any price to purchase the strip and wear it on every occasion they can get away with. They even paint their faces with the Cross of St George. The popular tide is so powerful that 10, Downing Street is flying the England flag on match days and only a few curmudgeonly councils are left still trying to limit displays of this symbol of the nation's faith.

There is a wonderful fellowship among supporters. Wherever you go as an England supporter, you are guaranteed acceptance and friendship from other supporters anywhere in the world.

Football has priority in supporters' lives. On match days, offices, factories and schools close or provide space to watch the game on TV. Even managers and head masters who think football is irrelevant know that it is pointless to resist. Too many believers put the game before work or school for it to be practical to carry on as if nothing of vital significance were going on. Some things matter much more than making money or even than making your way in life.

Ecstasy is an England goal. To win the World Cup would be the final consummation, a beatific vision. The sharp pain of defeat is almost too much to bear, but it is a shared pain. We are members one of another. The team on the field may disappoint. They may deserve to be booed. But we are still England. We can criticize, bitch and moan, but we won't give up on them. We shan't change and support another team. We're not apostates from the national side and never could be.

And the great thing is that anyone can be an England fan. You don't have to be a particularly good person or even to be good at football. You don't have to deserve to be an England supporter. You only have to believe. Obviously, however, once you become a supporter, you're totally committed. You can't claim to be an England fan if you only support them in the good times. It is meaningless to say you support England if you don't trouble about the score all of the time. Anyone can become an England supporter, but you're not a real supporter unless you remain faithful through thick and thin, unless football really matters in your life.

Many fans are what you might call cradle supporters. Their dads passed on the faith to them. They took them to matches, explained the rules, encouraged them to play themselves. Weekends at home were structured around the match – either going to the game or watching it on TV. Members of the family who were not football supporters knew better than to expect fans to be happy about being asked to give up their football so that they could wallpaper the hall, go shopping at Bluewater or have Mum over for dinner. Fans like these grow up in the faith and often remain loyal till their dying day. Other fans are converts. They might have grown up in homes where football wasn't important, but they've picked up the faith from their friends. They've watched it on TV with their mates. They've been talked into going along to matches. They've been converted not only by the action on the pitch, which, quite honestly, sometimes seems uninspiring and difficult to understand. What has really converted them has been the experience of belonging to a vast movement, a fellowship of mates, dedicated in a common cause and full of enthusiasm.

A very few supporters are perhaps people who have wondered why football is so important in so many people's lives and have gone along to a game on their own and somehow picked up on the buzz. And, possibly, some fervent fans started their pilgrimage with solitary research into the rules and history of the game – but I doubt it. Faith is a mass movement and is generally caught from other faithful people.

In conclusion, football is a wonderful phenomenon. Fandom is open to all. It gives people the sense of a higher purpose in their lives. It unites communities. It takes its devotees to the highest summits and lowest depths of emotional experience. It provides an escape from the mundane and the humdrum. It demands total commitment, but the paradox is that it is in making that absolute commitment that the true fan experiences utter release from the limitations of his humanity.

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