

Tuesday Reflection 13 July 2021

Reflecting on the events of Sunday evening at Wembley, I was reminded of the lines from *O Little Town of Bethlehem*: “The hopes and fears of all the years are met in you tonight.”

What I think had happened was that all the hopes for national renewal had been placed on the shoulders of 26 young men and their manager, who in their diversity, mutual respect and humility embodied so many positive qualities.

This reminds me of the legend of St. Christopher carrying a child across a river; the child grew ever heavier, because it was carrying the burden of the sorrows and suffering of the whole world. The burden placed on the shoulders of those 26 young men was excessive, and it was unfair to expect them to atone for the frustration and suffering of a whole nation.

In a way, what we experience here is a kind of scapegoat effect; in Leviticus we read how one of the sacrificial goats selected by Aaron was to be used for atonement by sending it into the desert carrying the sins of the people. By extension, what the scapegoat demonstrates in psychological terms is the way in which we hive off our shadow or dark side instead of owning it and facing up to it.

This definitely applies to the phenomenon of suffering. We all suffer in different ways, but as the American sociologist and contemplative Parker J Palmer observed: “Violence is what happens when we don’t know what else to do with our suffering.”

This brings us on to one of the uglier sides of the aftermath of Sunday evening; the England team was ethnically rejoicingly diverse, but that did not stop some of our fellow-citizens for heaping racial abuse on certain of the young players. Related to this was the way large sections of those attending the match reacted to the Italian team. Obviously the crowd was going to be partisan, as at any sporting event, but at the same time it was only by chance that England were playing this match at Wembley, and the Italian team, as guests in our country, deserved at least a modicum of respect and hospitality, instead of which there was booing and whistling each time an Italian player touched the ball. Let us not forget the words of Exodus 22:21: “Do not mistreat or oppress a foreigner, for you were foreigners in Egypt”. Perhaps it is not just in footballing terms that we still have a lot of work to do.

So the question remains: if unresolved suffering leads to hostility and violence, how is suffering to be resolved? As Christians we have a model for this: suffering and violence and hostility are resolved by acceptance of the other and by acts of mercy and loving kindness.

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