FOOTBALL DOES MATTER

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Category: Observations

Conforming to the established stereotype, and much to the anguish of supporters across the nation, England lost the final of Euro 2021 on penalties last night.

As I've grown older, my once passionate interest in football has waned. The lad who stood on the terraces at Roker Park for most home games has grown into the old bloke who went to bed half way through last night's match. Of course, I'd like England to have won, but the fact that they didn't does not have a huge impact on me personally.

It would be tempting to write something pious about about football not being very important and that the only real thing that matters is our relationship to Jesus. The problem with statements like this (and I've seen a few on Twitter today) is that while they are right, they are also profoundly wrong.

Football is important because it matters very, very much to a lot of people. We cannot simply dismiss it as 22 grown men chasing after a ball; it is far more than that to many people.

As Christians, we need to think about this on a number of levels. Firstly, there is the recurring missionary theme that we need to be willing to meet people where they are. Joining in with talks about last night's match helps us to build bridges with others - obviously this is easier for some of us than others. I've found that being willing to chat about English football has helped me get into conversation with people all over the globe - even if the Chelsea fan that I chatted to in Togo had never heard of Sunderland. OK, these conversations won't all turn into evangelistic opportunities, but people are not likely to want to listen to us talking about what is important in our lives if we won't chat to them about their passions.

It is tempting to fall back on the conviction that the gospel is far more important than any ball game and that people should listen to us. The problem is that while we might see things in these terms, other people don't and simply banging them over the head with our beliefs is hardly likely to make them change their minds.

However, I think there is something deeper going on here that we need to consider. In many ways, football is like a religion. It provides a transcendental, communal experience. Last night millions of people were caught up in an event which united them in hope, excitement and ultimately grief. As a Christian, I believe that this is only a pale shadow of the experience of being united to God and to the world-wide church, through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. One of the reasons that football is so popular is that the communal experience gives a glimpse of what it is that we are

missing in this fallen world - just listen to the longing captured in the secular hymn Three Lions.

The challenge that we face as Christians is to demonstrate that our story and our communal life is better than the one that football has to offer. My concern, is that I'm not convinced that we do this or that we are willing to adapt our practices in such a way that people would even notice.

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