

ENQUIRE WITHIN

Question: *With the World Cup in full swing in June, 2010, and the final on 11th July, are you by any chance praying for an English victory in the World Cup Competition, Neil?*

Answer: Er, no. That would be an abuse of religion. I was mildly surprised that the C of E National Communications Office published prayers about the footie written by Nick Baines, the Bishop of Croydon. Here they are, so see what you think?

Prayers for all those involved in the World Cup

1. Lord of all the nations, who played the cosmos into being, guide, guard and protect all who work or play in the World Cup. May all find in this competition a source of celebration, an experience of common humanity and a growing attitude of generous sportsmanship to others. Amen.

2. God of the nations, who has always called his people to be a blessing for the world, bless all who take part in the World Cup. Smile on South Africa in her hosting, on the nations represented in competition and on those who travel to join in the party. Amen.

A prayer for those simply not interested

Lord, as all around are gripped with World Cup fever, bless us with understanding, strengthen us with patience and grant us the gift of sympathy if needed. Amen.

The Bishop added: "More than half the population pray at some time and everyone will be affected by the World Cup in one way or another, so it makes sense to have some prayers for those that want to use them. This isn't just about football; it's about the rainbow nations of the world celebrating together with the people of South Africa."

Whilst rather a curious little item, the prayers are, in fact, full of good things. They are inclusive, they promote a sense of human unity in what is, after all, a tough competition prepared for over several years, and they stress the need to be generous in defeat as in victory. These are indeed good messages, don't you agree?.

What would be silly would be for some people to pray to God asking for divine intervention to ensure a victory for their particular team. Religion does not provide such a route to success via prayers to God and if it did it would be a mockery, wouldn't it?

What I would like to see arising from the World Cup 2010 is a new spirit within the game, a spirit of enjoyment, a spirit of fair play and a spirit of adults setting a good example in public as they play sport.

I deplore the manner in which professional footballers act with pettiness and petulance when things don't go the way they want. How shocking it is to see grown men throwing punches, pushing each other or even the referee, and exaggerating the impact of tackles in order to gain advantages.

Professional football needs a make-over which will make it a pleasure to watch, rather than the often scrappy and tetchy display of human frailty is so often is today.

If young people in schools, including aspiring players, were to see the professionals behaving in a friendly manner, and accepting decisions with a good grace, that could be a great contribution to our future as a nation.

Already, football has contributed well to good race-relations in our country. The excellence of many players from Africa and the Caribbean has enhanced community relations as many people admired the skills and attitudes of such players on the pitch, and took to their hearts these players, especially as they rose to play for England.

Football could and should be something to enjoy and celebrate without the anger and the implacable, bitter blindness to the skills of the "other team".

I hope that in South Africa 2010, we see something of the best in our humanity celebrated and promoted and that the tournament provides a good example as well as enjoyment for everyone with any sort of interest. That would fill us all with cheer, and cheers for the team work and individual skills on display.

