

Dear Friends

England lost a football match. No surprises there but this time I was disappointed because I honestly thought they would win. The remarkable progress of this team through the Euros, the decisive score-line against Germany, the exuberance of their victory over Ukraine, the sheer nerve and hotspur in beating Denmark and then nemesis: Italy. England lost a football match but I believe there is much England can take pride in and I also believe there are some valuable things we could learn about patriotism from Gareth Southgate and this team.

If you haven't read it, Gareth Southgate wrote an inspirational letter to English fans as the tournament gathered pace.

<https://www.theplayertribune.com/.../dear-england-gareth...>

I commend it to you.

When I was growing up patriotism wasn't something that preoccupied me at all. I didn't follow the national team and was only a year old when England won the world cup. I enjoyed the silver jubilee and have always maintained a respect for the Queen while being wobbly about the monarchy as an institution. I liked singing patriotic nonsense songs as our family sat and watched the last night of the proms without taking any of the words very seriously, but 'love of country' wasn't something I gave any thought to.

Like many white, middle class, English people I wasn't really aware of being English at all until I started going abroad and meeting people from other nations and listening to the stories of people whose families were born overseas.

We live in a nation when questions of patriotism have become more critical, especially as the United Kingdom continues to fragment. The national identities of Scotland, Wales and Ireland are being asserted more strongly while some of the 'island story' many of us were taught at school is being challenged by a growing awareness of the shadow-side of empire and colonialism. We are also discovering the hidden and neglected histories of African and Caribbean people who made great contributions to our society thanks to dramatists like Steve McQueen, playwrights closer to home and historians like David Olusoga.

It's worth quoting part of the letter that Gareth Southgate wrote

'Like with our own memories of watching England, everyone has a different idea of what it actually means to be English. What pride means'

He continues . 'For me personally, my sense of identity and values is closely tied to my family and particularly my grandad. He was a fierce patriot and a proud military man

who served during World War 2. The idea of representing Queen and Country has always been important to me.’ He continues ‘My grandad’s values were instilled in me from a young age and I couldn’t help but think of him when I lined up to sing the national anthem before my first international cap’

Gareth Southgate touches on something important here, which is that our sense of belonging is defined by the stories we tell ourselves, our own stories our family’s stories and our nation’s stories too. He acknowledges that this will mean different people will have a different sense of what it is to be English. ‘For many of the younger generation, your notion of Englishness is quite different from my own. I understand that too’.

Gareth Southgate goes on to describe the incredible pride his players have found in representing their country and affirms that they are role models for their nation. In other words what happens off the pitch is as important as what happens on the pitch. He says, ‘I have never believed we should just stick to football.’ He goes on ‘I know my voice carries weight, not because of who I am but because of the position I hold.... I have a responsibility to the wider public to use my voice and so do the players.’

We have seen this played out in practice, most notably by Marcus Rashford who drew on his own experience of growing up to make the government change its mind about free school meals. Other players have too, like the brilliant Raheem Sterling, telling their stories and seeking to create change, most notably making a stand against racism. Gareth Southgate has modelled his explicit opposition through managing a team that is incredibly diverse.

Every one of us is a complex set of overlapping identities. Although we may sometimes experience a tension between them, it doesn’t mean these identities are exclusive of each-other, I will never cease to love London although I live in Yorkshire and I take pride in both. For many people who can trace their family origins to other nations, celebrating overlapping identities; taking a deep and genuine pride in the culture and language of the nations their families have come from doesn’t diminish their genuine pride in belonging to the United Kingdom although racism and exclusion can make this a costly pride.

Patriotism is about pride and it’s about belonging and it’s about asking questions too.

There’s a hymn that is sometimes sung on patriotic occasions which speaks of ‘a love that asks no questions.’ I have always thought that line made no sense. It’s a line that seems to belong to those who would snuff out dissent and opposition such as the Communist authorities who are destroying democracy in Hong Kong.

There is a healthy tradition of asking awkward questions in British history; Patriots will ask hard questions of their country because they love it and want it to be better. Patriotism that isn’t afraid to celebrate all that is good and praiseworthy about our

nation but that doesn't deny that like all nations there are things which cause us shame too. Gareth Southgate expresses himself like this. 'I understand that on this island, we have a desire to protect our values and traditions – as we should- but that shouldn't come at the expense of introspection and progress.'

You may be wondering what any of this has to do with being Christians, after all our ultimate home is with God and we are called to march to a different drum. Its well expressed in another hymn which says, 'the drumbeats of his army are the heart beats of his love.'

Many of the first Christians were Jews who lived in a nation under occupation by an imperial power and whose people they burned with a fierce sense of national pride, they were no strangers to questions of patriotism and the dilemmas it created. Do you remember when Jesus was offered a coin and asked if it was lawful to pay taxes to Caesar? This question is all about faith and patriotism for if God is King how could it be lawful to pay taxes to a Roman King who was said to be a god? Jesus confounded his critics by saying 'give Caesar what is Caesar and God what is God's.'

When patriotism becomes a way of defining ourselves against others it can become idolatrous and dangerous. It is this kind of patriotism that excuses racism and creates policies like the 'hostile environment' because it creates fear and diminishes the humanity of other people; it's the very opposite of what Jesus does when he welcomes all kinds of people, especially the vulnerable and excluded to share in his kingdom.

What I like about Gareth Southgate's approach to patriotism is that is generous and inclusive and demonstrates a willingness to use his voice to champion diversity and more than this; he models what he argues for in the way he manages the English football team.

I was more than a little sad that we lost that final even though football is not my favourite sport but I was in awe of a remarkable team of young men who played their hearts out for more than ninety minutes. The racist abuse that has been vented on social media following the penalty shoot out shames us all and makes me wonder if the nation is worthy of the team that represents us. Calling this out is essential, as both the Archbishop of Canterbury and Prince William have done. I hope those who govern our nation will measure up to this challenge and show some measure of the courage it takes to stand in front of tens of thousands of supporters and millions more at home and take a penalty, knowing how much it counts.

The World Cup is next year so who knows what could happen?

Your friend and pastor

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