



From Ashes to Glory

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Cricket is the new football, or so they say. This year's Ashes Test Series between England and Australia has defined the British summer. For those who had previously been bemused by a game lasting five days with no guarantee of a result, the fact that five of these encounters can generate such tension and excitement over eight weeks has been something of a revelation. For those of us who had always suspected that cricket is the national sport of heaven, it has presented other opportunities for reflection.

It may not have escaped the attention of some church-going readers that both of England's two victories of the series were won during traditional service times. On Sunday 7th August at approximately 11.45 am, Steve Harmison had Michael Kasprovicz caught behind to give England a two-run victory – the narrowest in Ashes history; I was just about to serve Communion. At 6:35 pm on Sunday 28th August, Ashley Giles clipped a ball to the leg side to secure the victory target with only 3 wickets left; I had just given the 'call to worship' and introduced the opening hymn. I mention this not to solicit either your sympathy or admiration, but to make the point that, despite being otherwise engaged, I knew precisely when these moments occurred – I heard them. The not-so-stifled cry from the youth group meeting behind the church on the Sunday morning, and the steady stream of worshippers coming in from the car park ten minutes late on the evening were tell-tale signs. Almost without exception, apologies

ensued. People were sorry that worship had been interrupted or delayed . . . 'but it was just so exciting!'

For some, such events are confirmation of the triumph of triviality in our postmodern culture, as we amuse ourselves to death, slowly losing our grip on greater and more substantial issues. Others would present such stories as evidence of a new idolatry that stalks the land, where people's inevitable devotion has become re-focused elsewhere – not uncommonly on the flight of a ball. For me, though, it presented another option. The excitement that was evident – the enthusiasm, engagement and, ultimately, the joy – opened up, more effectively than church often does, the heart of being human.

In the Bible, the Psalmist writes that, '. . . apart from [God] I have no good thing' (Psalm 16:2, NIV). In other words, the ability to recognise and appreciate that which is good is a divine business. God is necessary to the process of celebrating goodness wherever it is to be found, whether we realise it or not. Culture, drama, music, art, and – perhaps for a larger proportion of the population than any of those – sport, are perhaps the mainstays of our engagement with the good in our lives. It may well be that, in isolation, the beauty of a concerto is more immediately noticeable than an exquisite cover drive. But when that shot is placed, as it has been this summer, within a two-month narrative involving history, personality, passion, bravery and triumph, it grips people. It becomes a means to appreciate just a little more of the glory of what it is to be human, to be taken outside of ourselves – to gain a taste of heaven.

As 'Jerusalem' has become the hymn of the moment, some may have balked at the superimposing of the words 'countenance divine' over the grinning visage of Andrew 'Freddie' Flintoff. Yet the heroism which has attached to him over these weeks has not been exclusively about his cricketing prowess. It has focused at least as much on questions of character, courage, compassion and generosity of spirit – old-fashioned sportsmanship. The Christian notion of incarnation invites us all to take up the challenge of mirroring in our own lives, and recognising in others, the countenance of Christ, whether our business is that of fast bowling or anything else.

And so, as I received the apologies of the cricket-delayed members of the congregation this summer, I refrained from being too critical. Instead, after finding out the details of the score, I suggested that something of the joy that they had tasted be brought to, and made a part of, their future worship – a true celebration of all that is good. And that the challenge to become a part of that glory, not merely a spectator of it, should be heard and responded to. For, of course, if the focus remains on the cricket field alone, that is idolatry – putting something in God's place. And one day (probably, knowing England, quite soon) we will end up disappointed. What is needed is the ability, imagination and encouragement to translate the glory that we have experienced this summer, in so many unlikely places, into something even more exciting and enduring – a relationship with the God who provides all good things. Now, what was that call to worship again . . . ?