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A winger and a prayer: how football can come home

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How many sermons tomorrow morning will reflect on the biggest football match in this country since the World Cup final in 1966? How many clerics in churches, synagogues, mosques and temples across this land will cheekily implore their congregations (notwithstanding Scottish members of their flock) to say a prayer for England's footballers, who are on the verge of "bringing football home"? The Rev Samuel Ashe, an 18th-century English clergyman, would not have been one of them. He spent his Sunday afternoons hiding in the trees where people were playing football. When the ball came near him he would catch it and pierce it with a pin. He could then go home pleased to have stopped his parishioners from "sinning".

In the Victorian era churches were suspicious of sport, not least because it often took place on Sunday as well as being associated with gambling and drinking.

At the same time, however, churches in that era founded and ran sports clubs. It has been estimated that in Birmingham, for example, in 1871-80, more than 20 per cent of football and cricket teams were run by churches. Several English Premier League clubs, including Everton, Liverpool, Manchester City and Tottenham Hotspur, trace their origins to a church team. When Southampton moved to a new stadium in 2001, calling their new home St Mary's was a nod to the club's origins in St Mary's Church.

In recent years, many Premier League and Football League clubs have appointed a chaplain to contribute to the spiritual welfare of the players and staff. Chaplains, according to the website of Sports Chaplaincy UK, “provide pastoral and spiritual care, by permission, to those of faith or no faith, for the holistic wellbeing of all involved in the community of sport”.

There are many church football leagues around the country and even a national cup. A Church of England initiative called Ministry of Sport has a mission of enabling sport-loving Christians to live out their faith through their involvement in sport.

Pope John Paul II established an office for sport in the Vatican in 2004 so that the Holy See would have a presence “in the important nerve centre of contemporary culture called sport”. Its aims include fostering a sports culture that encourages Christian witness by sportsmen and sportswomen.

Pope John Paul II made 120 public statements on sport to the extent that he was sometimes referred to as the “sporting pope”. During the 1974 football World Cup, he said that he did not believe that you should pray for your team to win, but that he had made an exception when Poland played West Germany.

The apostle Paul wrote: “Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one gets the prize? Run in such a way as to get the prize” (I Corinthians ix, 24) and “anyone who competes as an athlete does not receive the victor’s crown except by competing according to the rules” (II Timothy ii, 5).

A good starting point in gaining a biblical view of sport would be Genesis I, which reveals God as the creator of all things. From the universe, sun, moon, and stars, down to the smallest creature — all have their origin in God. That must include sport, our ability to play sport and our enjoyment of it.

This thought is well expressed in the words attributed to Eric Liddell, the 1924 Olympic gold medallist in the film *Chariots of Fire*, “God made me for a purpose, but he also made me fast and when I run, I feel his pleasure.” There seems no reason why a piece of sporting skill should not bring pleasure to God, pleasure in something that he has created. Sporting ability is as much a gift from God as other creative abilities such as singing, painting and writing.

In a year with England competing in the final of Euro 2020, followed by the Olympics and an Ashes series, it is good to remember the words of Pope Francis: “It is important that sport remains a game. Only by remaining a game will it do good for the body and spirit.”

Sport, which has been called “the world’s most important triviality”, can also be seen as a gift from God, an opportunity for worship and at the same time an opportunity to love one’s neighbour in the midst of competition. As a recent Vatican publication suggests, we can see in sport an opportunity for “the celebration of Sunday not only in the liturgy but in the life of the community”.

May the best team win, but if you’re keeping everything crossed for England tomorrow, you might also consider saying a little prayer.

Stuart Weir is director of Verité Sport, a charity that promotes a Christian presence in sport