

# Ipswich Unitarians

## RAINBOW WORLD IN THE RAINBOW NATION

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“We enter into a covenant that we shall build a society in which all South Africans, both black and white, will be able to walk tall, without any fear in their hearts, assured of their inalienable right to human dignity – a rainbow nation at peace with itself and the world.”

It is sixteen years since Nelson Mandela spoke those words in his inaugural speech as President of South Africa. As with all high hopes, that speech was a hostage to fortune and it cannot honestly be said that the reality of post-apartheid South Africa has yet matched the vision spelled out that day in May 1994.

This is not to say that much has not been achieved, but South Africa remains beset by many serious problems – such as poverty, unemployment, social division and crime. And yet Mandela’s vision remains valid, just as his phrase, “a rainbow nation”, has caught the imagination of many around the world. And now the world has come to South Africa as never before, in the shape of that four-yearly extravaganza, the World Cup.

The phrase “rainbow nation” has been particularly appropriate, for if the World Cup brings nothing else it brings colour! The flags of the participating nations, whether on flag poles or draped over their legions of supporters; the painted faces; the bewildering array of costumes and personal decoration sported by the fans; not to mention the shirts worn not only by the footballers on the field but by those watching them – some shapely, some shapeless, and many who quite clearly haven’t kicked a football in years!

And so, to the wall-shattering sound of the vuvulezas, the “rainbow world” has come to the “rainbow nation”, with people of every hue and skin-colour under the sun, people of every inhabited continent - and people of maybe every faith too. Many of the players, on taking the field, will perform some brief ritual that indicates their religion. And some of the national flags too will incorporate a religious symbol – such as England’s cross of St. George or Algeria’s crescent moon and star.

So the World Cup competition is a rainbow of colour, of ethnicity, faith, and of political ideology too. And, under the banner of football, all these are – briefly – united in one of the world’s great festivals. There is a downside too, of course, but although we must acknowledge its presence, maybe – for once – we shouldn’t wallow in it. Just as the true “rainbow nation” remains a worthy, if as yet unachieved, vision, so too the “rainbow world” is worth celebrating as a hope for which to strive.

South Africa, since the fall of apartheid, has actually done well at hosting sporting festivals that reflect a “rainbow world”. In 1995 there was the historic Rugby Union World Cup, won by the host nation and memorable, even for non-Rugby fans, for Kiri Te Kanawa’s glorious rendition of the tournament’s stirring theme song, ‘World in Union’. And then the Cricket World Cup, won by Australia, followed in 2003.

But although these events also brought the “rainbow world” to the “rainbow nation”, they could not do so on such a scale as the present World Cup competition, simply because no other sport is so universally played and watched as football – Association Football, or, ‘soccer’, that is! No other sport unites so many people in an interest and a passion that transcends so many of the

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boundaries keeping people apart. Produce a football on almost any piece of open ground in the world and before you can enquire about anyone's language, politics or religion, you will have a game in progress, inhibited only by differing interpretations of the offside rule!

Yes, football is sometimes marred by the stupidity and nastiness of which human beings are all too capable but, overall, I think the world is a better place for it. And that's why I enjoy the World Cup: not just for the football itself but also for the crowds, the people, and the gamut of human emotions that – thanks to television – we can see expressed on their faces as goals are scored or missed; as players bewilder with their skills or frustrate with their errors; as the excruciating tension of a penalty shoot-out reaches its climax.

The World Cup, for me, is a great festival of humanity, the fascination of which is not dependent on the fortunes of the England team! And down the years the World Cup has delivered many special moments that live in the memory. One was Pak Doo Ik's goal for North Korea at Ayresome Park, Middlesbrough, in 1966 that sent the much-fancied Italians home early – to a hail of rotten tomatoes! And the North Koreans are at the World Cup this time too – for the first time since 1966 – showing that football is able to draw even that unhappy, reclusive and paranoid nation out into the daylight once in a while! Something its people sorely need.

Now you may have noticed that I haven't mentioned Wayne Rooney once so far, and nor do I intend to! Without wishing him any disrespect, I am well aware that not everyone is interested by football in general or by the World Cup in particular. They will be looking forward to 13<sup>th</sup> July, by which time it will all be over – until the next time! But even if you don't like football, or sport of any kind, you cannot deny the importance of athletic competition in human societies throughout history. Its existence testifies to a human need to match oneself against others in competition, whether individually, as in tennis, or as part of a team, as in football. And in order to match oneself against others, one must first match oneself against oneself, both physically and mentally, striving for excellence in body and mind – and maybe in spirit too. As Paul wrote: "At the games...all the runners take part, though only one wins the prize. You also must run to win. Every athlete goes into strict training." (I Corinthians 9: 24-25)

Paul was using sport as an analogy, of course – an analogy for the spiritual struggle that the gospel demands of us. But he saw physical fitness as part of this: "I do not spare my body," he wrote, "but bring it under strict control..." (v. 27) He wasn't talking here about some obsessive and unhealthy asceticism, but rather the idea that our spiritual welfare cannot be separated from our physical and mental welfare. Although any one of us may be struck down by an illness or an injury beyond our control, we will be better able to face it if we are healthier in spirit. And also, our neglect of our physical welfare all too often accompanies a spiritual malaise. As Paul wrote, "I am no aimless runner." (v. 26).

And it was Paul who gave us the idea of the body as a temple: "Do you not know that your body is a temple of the indwelling Holy Spirit, and the Spirit is God's gift to you? ...Then honour God in your body." (I Corinthians 6: 19, 20) Of course, one does not have to take part in sport to do this! And, sadly, some sportsmen and women don't do it either, hence the reports of drug and alcohol abuse amongst them. But maybe, when we see a footballer enact a prayer as he runs on to the field, we are seeing someone who is remembering to honour God in his body. And there's a lesson there for everyone watching too, if they have "eyes to see".

But we can't all be superfit footballers, of course, and it would be foolish to pretend that honouring God in one's body can be reduced to a matter of physical fitness. It can, though,

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involve a sense of wonder at the amazing structure that is the human body, which we all too often take for granted until something goes wrong! Which, of course, it inevitably will.

When Nelson Mandela delivered his inaugural speech in 1994, four years after his dramatic release from prison, the world witnessed an event that would have seemed unbelievable for most of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. And in that speech he too made the link between the physical, mental and spiritual dimensions of existence and insisted that freedom must embrace them all. “Let each know”, he said, “that for each the body, the mind and the soul have been freed to fulfil themselves.”

Mandela’s vision, like Mandela himself, achieved iconic status, not only in South Africa but across the continent and amongst the true friends of Africa elsewhere. But Mandela’s country and continent – and many other places in the world too – have yet to see freedom of body, mind and soul displace fully the hunger and disease, the oppression and corruption, the violence and hatred that have proved so tragically obdurate there. Mandela’s cry, “Let there be work, bread, water and salt for all,” may ring rather hollow in South Africa’s teeming townships. And his hope for an end to “oppression of one another” remains just that, a hope, when across Africa there remain regimes that exploit and persecute people because of their “tribe”, their gender, their sexual orientation or their religion. And, of course, it’s not just in Africa.

Nelson Mandela was under no illusions about his own ability to bring about the transition he urged upon his countrymen. But it would be wrong to be too cynical about his vision. Not only have quite incredible changes taken place in South Africa since, like the walls of Jericho, apartheid crumbled away, but that vision remains to inspire and to be the standard against which South Africa’s rulers, and those of other countries too, must be measured.

And if the concept of the “rainbow nation” lost some of its lustre in the aftermath of the euphoria that greeted it, then maybe the coming of the “rainbow world” to South Africa will do something to refresh and reinvigorate it. I hope so, and let’s pray that it will be so. And as Nelson Mandela said at the end of that speech, “God bless Africa.”

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