

Legion

I have a theory. Newly developed. In the wake of England's football performance on Thursday evening. Everyone's complaining – worst performance imaginable in a world cup football match. England didn't lose – they drew – but they drew not only against the most famous of footballing nations, USA (who, it seems, only discovered the existence of soccer three weeks ago) but also against another great footballing superpower – Algeria.

England didn't lose, of course, but since we are among the favourites to win this year's world cup, we just didn't do well enough. We didn't play hard enough, or with any passion. So – lots of very angry fans – some people have given up their jobs to go to South Africa and watch, some have taken out loans to travel, and made huge sacrifices. And all England has been able to give to them, is a draw.

My theory though – is this – and please forgive the silliness of it! That you can't blame English footballers, for being English. In the history of English conflicts – this country does not do too well, when we are favourites to win!

In 60 AD, Queen Boudicca led a massive army against relatively tiny Roman forces. We outnumbered them hugely – we couldn't lost ... oops.

At the Battle of Bannockburn, in the year 1314, England were three to one favourites against the Scots! What happens? England lost. I bet the fans were very disappointed.

The colonials among us might recall the Battle of Bunker Hill in 1775. Those cheeky American rebels defended a hill against massively superior British numbers, and though the British eventually won by shielding themselves from the bullets using each other, over a thousand soldiers were killed or wounded, whilst on the American side, the total casualties consisted of a fast food chef with a twisted ankle.

England never seem to do too well when they are favourites. Put them in a position, however, when the pressure is really on – and they begin to perform! The battle of Agincourt – the English army outnumbered approximately 5-1 comes away with a victory. The Spanish Armada – completely outgunning the British Fleet – was despatched. Queen Elizabeth was so pleased, she didn't pay the sailors a penny! The Battle of Britain – it was impossible to survive – and yet being so heavily outnumbered, we seem content with a draw. Put England in a situation where it's unlikely to win – and they start to perform.

So – when England play on Wednesday – now everyone expects them to lose, I'm sure we'll do extremely well! Well – I'm sure if you look into it closely enough, it is a theory that is easily discredited. But, it seems to me, this is quite a biblical way of being. If it's true of England, it certainly seems true of Israel – and of the church.

When we are in a position of power – things don't seem to go too well. Time after time the prophets have said this: that – when Israel gets comfortable, it becomes complacent and does not thrive. It gets greedy and lazy and wants to hold on to power. When Israel was wandering through the wilderness as a nomadic people – they would trust God each day – but oh dear, when they settle down and get themselves a king, it all starts to go wrong.

And so we read of poor old Elijah – in trouble with King Ahab and his wife, Jezebel. Successful, comfortable, happy – apart from this irritating prophet who keeps complaining about their unfaithfulness to Yahweh. Elijah gets wind of the fact that they have vowed to kill

him. And from where we heard in the Old Testament reading – Elijah is thoroughly cheesed off. In fact, by the end of the reading, he's finished the cheese and moved on to the coffee and cigars. And he seeks God's presence in the mighty wind – but it isn't there. And he seeks God's presence in the earthquake – and it isn't there either. And then, there is the still, small voice.

God doesn't need power to be present. And Elijah himself is hardly in a position of power. But there is the still, small voice. And I wonder sometimes, whether we become so obsessed with getting things right and pursuing a strategy and wanting to exert Christian force from a position of power, that we are not attuned to the still, small voice. God's presence is there in a whisper.

The Gospel reading makes a similar point. Jesus is not in Israel. He's crossed over to the wrong side of the lake, into Gentile territory, no longer on home turf. And when he arrives he is greeted by a demon possessed man. The demon's name is what? It is the name of the occupying power! Doesn't that tell you something! The power of Rome in its eastern territories – was exerted by its legions! And so to call this demon, "Legion" is a statement about Roman power here! It is demonic!

And so we read that, like elsewhere in the Gospels, the demon acknowledges Jesus and announces to everyone just who he is! But Jesus, not being on home turf, does something different here. Back in Israel, every time a demon acknowledges him, he shuts them up. Orders them to be quiet. Because Jesus is not ready to be proclaimed king. Once Jesus goes into Jerusalem, that changes – but until then, the demons are constantly trying to give away his divine status and Jesus is having none of it! Here... on foreign turf, where they are not going to try and make him King, Jesus seems to accept being called son of the most high God. The demon asks not to be cast into the abyss, so instead – what does Jesus do? He sends them into the most accursed, unclean of animals: pigs! The Legion is cast into the pigs, and the pigs throw themselves off the cliff and drown.

The man is freed! Now, can you imagine what it would be like if you lived there. You're under a violent Roman occupancy, living your life under Roman power. And then someone turns up claiming to be the King of your neighbouring country. He claims that the demons inside this man are basically called, "Roman Army" – and then he drives Roman Army into bunch of pigs who commit communal suicide. You would probably be afraid – not so much afraid of this Jesus and what he can do – but afraid of the consequences from the Roman authorities who will know exactly what to do with this kind of would-be king. Is it any wonder they asked Jesus to leave?

Legion wants to go with him – but Jesus appoints him to stay and tell everyone about how much God has done for him. Jesus gets back into the boat and returns to his home country. Essentially, he is returning from an away- victory – and the crowd are stood there to welcome him home. His supporters?

And here is the point for me: in the olden days, supporting a football team meant that you turned up, and helped the team, by supporting them. But today, football is not a bunch of random chaps from your hometown – they are the super-wealthy employees of an entertainment industry. The people who turn up to watch them are spectators, not supporters. A spectator will observe a spectacle, and clap and cheer when they like it, and boo and hiss when they don't. Most of those wrapping their lives up in the red cross of a St George's flag –

are not England supporters. They are England spectators. They are external to the event – outside them, observing – with a cool, detached distance.

I think the question today's readings leave for me, is whether we are spectators or supporters. A supporter does not sit in the stadium observing – clapping and cheering when they like it, booing or hissing when they don't. A supporter is drawn inside the event – part of what is happening.

A spectator will not hear the still, small voice. A spectator will ask Jesus to leave if he does something dangerous. A supporter will discern that there is more than wind and earthquake. A supporter will ask to go with Jesus when he does something dangerous. Are we supporters, or spectators?

Of course, when the church, like the nation, is in a position of power, it is difficult to be a supporter. If the church, if the country, is already powerful – the last thing it needs is my support!

But the real point of today's readings is the question of where true power really lies! Is it with the super-powerful King Ahab, or with the renegade prophet, Elijah? Is real power with the Roman empire and all its legions, or is it with this weird foreign peasant who claims to be the king of Israel?

The majority of us this morning, financially, politically, educationally – are, compared to the majority – in positions of power! And for a variety of reasons, our church here in Bloomsbury, is in a position of power! The possibility of us being supporters of our church: financially, socially, relationally, spiritually, is pretty thin! We are just as likely to be spectators who clap and cheer when we see something we like, and who hiss and boo when we don't. Christians are no better than Englishmen when it comes to being in a position of power.

But how discerning are we, really? Beyond the wind and the earthquake – where is the still small voice – in our church, in our lives? Outside the stadium, in the nitty gritty of real life. Where God is actually at work. Away from the perceived action and excitement – in the turmoil of our lives, where the real action is.

I wonder where is the real action – in our lives, in our church, in our world...? Where it really matters – where the still small voice might speak, if only we had the ears to listen. If only we could stop clapping and cheering and booing and hissing – what would God say to us? If we were inside the action, instead of observing it with brilliant critical eye, if we were inside the event, what would we hear?

If our ears really were open to what God is doing in the world, in the church, in our lives. What would we hear in that still, small voice? Probably best if we stop talking about it and find out for ourselves.