

The Beautiful Game?

Sunday 25 April 2021.

St. John, Ch. 10. vv. 11 – 18.

Avarice!

This last week has seen the world of football caught with its trousers down. What has been revealed is a shocking display of greed as several of the top teams in the country announced that they would be forming a European Super League with other foreign clubs. The League would be self-contained with lots of money for itself and little if any chance for smaller clubs to join, effectively cutting off the element of competition which is both attractive and motivational. The top of the soccer pyramid would be creamed off.

The outcry was immediate and overpowering. The thugs were taken by surprise and the whole idea of a Super League imploded within 72 hours.

We know that the best football is to be found in the industrial heartlands of the country where the game gives hope, colour, entertainment and identity to so many people who have been historically robbed of these vital ingredients.

Of course, there is a back storey: excessive wages, income from gate-money stopped with clubs and their owners running out of money. A new source of income was vital. If not, the whole organization would need a serious review. That is where we are today.

The Hireling.

This whole sorry story is judged by the parable of the Good Shepherd which St. John (10. 11 – 18) shares with us today. At the first sign of trouble, the hired hand runs away but The Good Shepherd, totally committed to his flock, will do anything for their welfare, including laying down his own life.

As we will know from our own rural context, rogue shepherds do not last long around here. Their insincerity is exposed by the demands of the job.

So, are the owners of our football clubs in it for the money or for the future of the game? This row exposes the rogue owners. It's not that owners and directors should not expect a fee but it must be proportionate.

The uproar this week shows just how far removed some of the club's owners are from their clubs and the fan-base. Foreign owners will struggle to understand the culture of our soccer clubs and the furious passions which they evoke. And there is a lesson here for any potential leader: they need to be close to their community.

The image below is of a 3rd century Syrian sculpture of The Good Shepherd. See how closely his hair is identified with the fleece of his sheep!



Pope Francis tells his pastors that they must be willing to take on the smell of the sheep if their work is to be effective. By this intimacy their leadership will prove to be genuine.

This parable of The Good Shepherd is a damning judgement on some of our football leaders: they neither know their players nor the fans. The revolt was inevitable.

Humility.

The parable ends by the shepherd being willing to lay down his life for the sheep in true humility. There are foreign owners who act in the best interests of their soccer clubs and the communities they serve. They are generous and sensitive. Without them the clubs would fold. However, this crisis does illuminate the cracks in the system and a thorough review is now overdue. There is talk of a suitability test for potential owners with the fans getting a voice. That can be very exciting and bring a greater wholeness to the world of soccer.

The Good Shepherd may not yet be redundant. Amen.