



Rev Diana Rattray
For all the gods of the
peoples are idols
Psalm 96:1-9
1 Thessalonians 1:1-10
Matthew 22:15-22
Year A Ordinary Time 29
22 October 2023

We know that many in Aotearoa New Zealand and other rugby obsessed countries treat top sports as quasi-religion. We know that in Aotearoa New Zealand Rugby players are treated as gods by some - they are feted when they win, and cut down when they lose. We know that reported domestic violence increases when the All Blacks lose, especially a big game such as the semi finals or finals of the Rugby World Cup. This week there was an opinion piece on the Radio New Zealand website. A social media journalist at RNZ, covering the rugby world cup in France, Jogai Bhatt stated she feels like the 2023 Rugby World cup exists in an alternate reality. The semi-finals and finals are being held against a backdrop of rising global tensions. Yes fans have held a minute's silence "In solidarity with all those affected by the tragic events in Israel and Gaza." However she says right now she is struggling to find the hype.¹

As we heard the reading from Matthew's gospel today, I couldn't help but think about the alternative gods in our world. Sports of various codes, social media influencers, musicians, actors. People held up and who are perceived to have power, money and influence.

¹ <https://www.rnz.co.nz/news/sport/500527/failing-to-feel-rugby-fervour-amid-growing-middle-east-crisis>

Some people are treated as more special than others. God treats people with impartiality - however the media and society certainly do not. When the Pharisees and the Herodians posed the question to Jesus about the paying of taxes, they were trying to trap him. He was not going to fall for it. The much quoted 'Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's' stopped their line of questioning. Jesus was not justifying a separation of the affairs of religion and the affairs of commerce and government - although some have used this passage to argue against the church being political when advocating for the vulnerable.

All of the world is in the midst of jockeying for power, supremacy, accessing and exploiting resources - in a sense trying to make gods out of money. Whether it is extreme violence or sport fanaticism we are being challenged to ask - what is important? What really matters? When we see the consequences of an airstrike on a civilian hospital, the loss of many innocent lives and those caring for them - the difficult questions must be asked. What can we do? How can we prevent further destruction and deaths? Change will only occur when we change - when our heart, our minds and in turn our systems and social contracts begin to look less like an empire and more like communities that protect the most vulnerable, and care for our fragile ecosystem.

There are two currencies Jesus challenges those around him, and indeed us, to examine - our commitment to earthly life and our commitment to the spiritual realm. Jesus' response to the Pharisees and Herodians' question has in turn left us with a question, a question of conscience. What are we to do when our allegiance to authority is in conflict with our allegiance to Christ? We know there are devout Christians who hold metrically opposing positions on a myriad of views - as recent political rallies have shown it can be difficult to align with many speaking or acting "in the name of Christ".

Just as all Palestinians and Israelis do not agree with the actions of the more radical factions - who ultimately are doing what they believe is right to bring about change. At the huge cost of human

lives. It is difficult, it is complicated. But we must engage in the discussion and ask how we can help with donations towards humanitarian aid - we cannot throw up our hands and ignore it.

Psalm 96 sung so beautifully this morning, proclaims the total authority of God over all creation and all peoples, including all who have power. Yet God's son walked into the world of ordinary people, living ordinary lives and advocating for the most vulnerable. We are encouraged to give in time, energy and resources to do the same. Not to covet a powerful way of life. Not to long for more money or influence. There is such a difference between the power and authority of God and the power and authority of human leaders. The gospel today reminds us that Christ is beyond our systems. The church has controlled who belongs in it and who can speak in it while many have been waiting at the edges.

This brings me back to rugby. On Thursday I went to a lecture by Australian feminist theologian Janice McRandal. The title of the lecture was 'Theology and Scrummage'. She was particularly focussing on women's rugby. Organised sport often does not include the same emphasis on women's participation, let alone opportunities for professional players and teams. Even after the recent Women's Football World cup, there is doubt that the benefits will trickle down to grass roots levels, and the development of girls and women's teams. To put it bluntly there is not the same dollar value in women's sport. Christian historian Diana Butler Bass writes "People (in sport) are becoming economically powerful because of their huge salaries or the way they can turn games into wealth," she said. "When you get into the concept of having power over others, you are not in sports anymore, you are not playing games. You're involved in oppression. You are involved in dehumanisation."²

Janice stated that Women's rugby has failed as a profit driven enterprise. However the game is evolving and developing. Normative

² <https://chqdaily.com/2018/07/diana-butler-bass-calls-attention-to-the-intersection-of-sports-and-spirituality/>

images around player stereotypes, and the type of women who play must continue to be disrupted. The body must be disrupted so that marginalised bodies fit in. Both in sports governing bodies as well as in the church. Our attitudes and actions, the way we choose to interact with the divine ties or binds us to God and to one another in faith, hope and love. The worship of false gods and idolatry draw us away from the one true God.

So in the words of Psalm 96 verse 5 (The message translation)

“Pagan gods are mere tatters and rags. God made the heavens.”³

And finally to repeat the words of our collect:

Generous God

You know each of us by name and you show no partiality.

Each of us is equally special to you.

May we become imitators of Christ

Demonstrator of your prodigal hospitality,

That we may be known by the quality of our ‘welcome’

May we also be known for our commitment to the wellbeing of our country and the world.

Amen.

³ <https://www.biblestudytools.com/msg/psalms/96.html>