



## Which World Cup?

You'll probably be aware that there's a World Cup on; certainly my children are talking about it. But which one?

Is it the World Cup taking place in England for cricket, England's national summer game, which is currently drawing audiences of a billion around the world? Or is it the women's World Cup for football happening in France? I suspect it is the latter. As I write, it's just hours away from our quarter final match against Norway.

Nearly 7 million people watched the Lionesses take on Cameroon; only 1 million people watched England's (male) cricketers take on Pakistan. It's not hard to pinpoint why: in 2005, cricket's administrators sold the broadcast rights to a subscription only TV service (Sky); women's football remains on the BBC.

So cricket is only appealing to people like me who are already converts while women's football, via national broadcast, is getting a massive injection of interest from people on the fringes. Cricket's administrators have woken up to this and are trying a last ditch attempt to get back onto mainstream TV with a competition called 'The Hundred', which will launch next year, but the jury is well and truly out on that one.

In the Church too, we face the danger of only reaching the people who are already keen on it. We still have plenty of weddings and baptisms at church, but it's certainly not the majority for these things, as it

was two generations ago. The pity of it is it's harder for us to achieve any cut-through, to people who happen to find themselves in church, rather than head in by design. Sometimes, chancing to be there, just because you're a friend of the groom is the best way to discover church, and those opportunities are going.

At least, we never intended it this way. Cricket's administrators, by contrast, achieved a kind of hari kiri, by conscious design: they took the immediate financial bonus (and the amount Sky offered in 2005 was miles more than Channel Four or the BBC could manage) but killed their golden goose in the process.

Of course, men's cricket's loss is women's football's gain, and that's good in a way, but it is a shame to me that the national conversation has gone. By quirk of empire, Britain bequeathed a legacy of cricket all over its colonies, from the West Indies to Afghanistan. At the actual grounds, which are for fans, it's a great product uniting people from all these cultures. When Afghanistan nearly beat India the other day, it would have been one of the first purely positive headlines that could be associated with Afghanistan. The way they've taken to the game and articulated a nationhood through it is fantastic. With a different TV coverage, that could have been a major story, and it could have left us to discuss Afghan refugees in this country, our historical responsibility from 2001 on and the 19th Century, and so on. Instead it remains an event for sports fans only.

*June 2019. Thought for the Train is a short column by the Rev Robert Stanier, the vicar of St Andrew and St Mark, Surbiton, for people to read on the train. You can also read "Thought for the Train" at [www.surbitonchurch.org.uk](http://www.surbitonchurch.org.uk).*