

58 Public and Private

In recent days President Francois Hollande of France has been having a tough time of it, and all of his own making. News has got out that he has been having an affair with an actress. Monsieur Hollande has refused to comment, taking the line that this is a purely private matter.

This plea - "I have a right to privacy" - is an old and common excuse used by people serving in important public office, and of course, in one sense, they are quite right. Nobody should be the victim of endless interference by reporters or photographers, and we have only to think back to how the late Princess Diana was treated to understand the tremendous harm that can be done.

But it isn't quite as simple as that. People who ask for the votes of the electorate are keen to put on "a good show" so as to win the day. Their marketing team will work hard to ensure that the candidate comes over to the public in the best possible light. Speeches are carefully planned to express what they believe the voters will warm to. Suitable "photo-opportunities" are staged. The image of the candidate, and it is only an image, is constructed to show that he or she is a thoroughly "good egg" - decent, pleasant, normal, sensible, reasonable and competent. And if all goes well on Election Day, the candidate is voted into office - job done!

Yet all the time, the voters are being asked to **trust** that what they are hearing and seeing is a true description of the real person who is asking for their votes: in other words, to trust that there is no discrepancy between the public image and the private reality.

If it turns out at some stage that there is in fact a marked discrepancy between the public image and the real, private person, then the plea for privacy becomes feeble - for the people have been misled, no more, no less. Their trust has been abused and broken.

A classic example of this in Scripture concerns King David and his dreadful behaviour concerning Uriah the Hittite and his wife Bathsheba (II Samuel 11 - 12). David was not asking for the votes of the people, but he was nevertheless the divinely-appointed figurehead of God's people, and as such his private conduct should have been as pure as anything he said or did in public.

But of course in this case, it wasn't. "The Lord sent Nathan to David" (II Samuel 12.1). In response to Nathan's simple little story, David "burned with anger" (verse 5), and pronounced instant judgement on the villain of the piece - "he deserves to die!".

And then Nathan uttered those awful words to the king - "You are the man" (verse 7). There was nowhere for David to hide, and no point in his reaching for the old excuse, "It's a private matter".

For the Lord sees all. He sees into the depths of our hearts, into the secret places. David knew that all too well - Psalm 139 - but the sight of a beautiful woman had made him overrule all that.

There is a world of a difference between a monarch or politician who is, for example, a practising Christian, with a stable, happy marriage and normal family life, and one who has very different ideas about such matters, such as Monsieur Hollande appears to have. To argue that the private values of an individual are irrelevant to how he or she will behave in public office is clearly a nonsense. "By their fruits you shall know them", the Lord tells us (Matthew 7.20) - and those fruits are displayed most accurately in someone's private life.

So it is all about trust, Let us not apologise for seeking to know about the real person behind a carefully-constructed public image, for therein is revealed who a person truly is, and the values by which he or she truly steers (for example, Mark 7. 20-23). At the same time we are to pray for those set in positions of responsibility (I Timothy 2.1), for they are fallen and fallible people in need of salvation in Christ, just like the rest of us.

We are also to look in the mirror ourselves - to check that the image we display in public is a true reflection of the life we live in private. For this possible public-private discrepancy does not only affect "them out there" - it might just also apply to "me, right here"! And when we get things wrong, as we do, we turn back to the Lord in repentance. In His mercy, the Lord is faithful to His promises.

I John 1.8-9 sums it up. Thanks be to God.

© 2014 Faithful Sheep Ministries - www.fsmins.org