

176 "The arrogance of unaccountable power"

"Power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely" - so run the now-famous words written by Lord Acton in April 1887. One hundred and two years later, in April 1989, 96 Liverpool football fans lost their lives in a terrible disaster at Hillsborough football ground in Sheffield. Immediately the South Yorkshire police in charge of the crowds that day blamed the fans for what had happened, and kept blaming them thereafter. For 27 years the families of the bereaved and injured have fought on and on and on for the truth to come out and for justice to be done. On 26th April 2016, a Coroner's Jury found in their favour - the fans were unlawfully killed, and the police, not the fans, were responsible.

This dreadful case has shone the spotlight on a culture within the police and the wider "Establishment" of what has been described as "the arrogance of unaccountable power". For the notion seems to have prevailed among these "powers that be" that they were unaccountable and untouchable, and that these ordinary, persistent, annoying families of the bereaved would soon give up. But they didn't, and finally, after 27 years, those telling words in Numbers 32.23 - "be sure your sin will find you out" - came to pass.

The Lord has so much to tell us in His Word about the use and abuse of power - instruction too often wilfully set aside these days, and at what cost. Time and again throughout the Scriptures, we see the human will overruling human accountability to higher authority, notably to God Himself. We can think of Adam; of the spreading wickedness before the great Flood; of Nimrod with his city and tower; of the constant moaning Israelites in the wilderness; of so many of the kings of Israel and Judah - David over Uriah and his wife, Jeroboam, Ahab, Manasseh and the rest of them; the Herods; Annas and Caiaphas; Pontius Pilate.

Since Bible times we have an equally long list of people in power who have committed these same sins. Apart from obvious tyrants who come to mind - Hitler, Stalin, Idi Amin, Pol Pot, Saddam, Gaddafi - we do well to be mindful of other, less obvious, areas of contemporary society where a lack of accountability can thrive. Consider for example the "arts" - television, films, music, theatre, art, sculpture - where a culture prevails of artistic licence, innovation, cleverness, "progress", a pushing of the boundaries, a delight in sensationalism. In such an environment, a sense of accountability is hardly near the top of the list! - and great damage can be done to a society, all the more so as it often goes unrecognised. We can think also of parents - they hold great power: and of those working in politics, banks, business, the press, universities, all of whom can drift into abusing the power they hold by overruling any sense of their accountability.

But mercifully we have examples of the other sort too. John the Baptist was entrusted with tremendous power, bluntly giving his message to all and sundry, while never forgetting his accountability to the Lord God who had appointed him, and to the One coming after him whose shoe he was not worthy to unloose (Luke 3.1-20). The Lord Jesus Himself lived in complete obedience and accountability to His Father. (A useful study is to go quite fast through John's Gospel, noting only the occasions when Jesus is mentioning God His Father: as fine an example of accountability that there is!). Nor did Paul ever lose for a moment his sense of accountability to the One who had appointed Him.

Perhaps the best contemporary example we have of great power being held alongside true accountability is in Queen Elizabeth II, whose Coronation vows and personal Christian faith have shielded her so notably from the abuse of her exalted position.

The fact is that all of us, made as we are in the image of God, hold some power for which we are accountable, to others, and to the Lord: (eg., Matthew 12.36 / Luke 12.1-5 / Romans 14.12 / I Corinthians 3.12-15 / Hebrews 13.17 / I Peter 4.5). In the light of the verdict in that Coroner's Court, we do well prayerfully to assess our own use of power, and where there is fault, to put into practice the precious words of Hebrews 4.16 and I John 1.8-9.

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