



Setting free the Truth

There does seem to be something of an irony when just a few weeks ago the airwaves were buzzing with questions about the place and role of super-injunctions. What right, we demanded, do the rich and famous have to be able to use our legal system to buy silence? The public have a right to know.

But the public's right to know does not extend to the underhand means to which some journalists have resorted in order to feed our insatiable appetite for gossip and rumour. And so it is that we are confronted with the dramatic and sudden closure of one of Britain's best known Sunday papers, the News of the World. As reaction and comment gathers pace, a strong sense is emerging that these practices are by no means restricted to just one publication.

Bankers might well breathe a sigh of relief, that for once it is not their morality which is under the spotlight. And it is perhaps morality, and the nature of morality which is the biggest issue in all of this. How, we might ask, could individuals simply not recognise how wrong it was to deliberately and illegally intrude into the private conversations, not only of celebrities and high profile public figures, but the victims, the vulnerable and the innocent. Surely someone, somewhere could recognise the depths to which so called investigative techniques were plummeting, and have the courage and responsibility to say when things had gone too far.

No doubt we will round on the latest batch of culprits, and quickly expose them to public distain - and it is right that they should be held responsible for what they have done. So too should those who have sought to cover up these unwholesome tactics. But we also have to recognise this as a symptom of a deeper and more widespread issue. Morality is something that we have been too content to see driven out of the world of business, displaced by the mantra that what really matters is the bottom line; this is the driving force and the measure of success.

The idea that our company might exist to manufacture a quality product, or provide high levels of service is a nice, but quaintly old-fashioned idea - we exist to make money. While these other things may at times be a means to that end, they must always come second to it. Yet what we are increasingly witnessing is that economics alone cannot be the key driver of our business strategies; the shortcomings and potential harm of such a tactic is being spectacularly borne out before our very eyes.

The currency of newspapers is circulation, and it is circulation that feeds that infamous bottom line. And in a generally diminishing market, it was no doubt in pursuit of circulation that journalists resorted to increasingly extreme and seedy tactics to make their stories outstrip the opposition in terms of detail and sensation. Yet when popularity and profit alone drive our moral choices, then at those moments when alarm bells should sound, our actions instead become falsely reinforced. Rather than being restrained by a sense of what is right or wrong, we are spurred on by the messages of success. And if the circulation figures are to be believed, around 3 million people were as good as saying "carry on - we like this kind of stuff". The age-old adage "never let the truth get in the way of a good story" has perhaps given way to "never let laws and morals get in the way of a good story".

Those of us of faith identity have the relatively safe option of keeping all of this stuff at an appropriate arm's length. Yet if that is our instinctive response, then this might also suggest to us how situations like this one come

about. If morality is becoming increasingly absent from the world of business, then to what degree is that because the Church is failing to engage with this sector as it should? It is all too easy for the Christian community to go about its business in a way which signals that somehow we need not be too concerned about what goes on beyond the confines of our outreach and activity programmes. But this is God's world, and the Psalmist would have us believe that every bit of it should be so described. Work is part of our God-ordained calling as we live in that world, and we should instinctively expect that God would have something to say in how we go about it. If the impression we give out is that God has no interest in what goes on in the world of work, then there is little room for complaint on our part, if people begin to act as though that's true.

One thing that emerges from all of this, is that Information is clearly a powerful thing. Celebrities are prepared to rank up huge legal bills simply to contain it, while some within the media will stoop pretty low to find it out. And of course ideas like uncovering the truth and sharing news with all the world are very familiar themes within the Christian faith. At the very heart of our understanding of the Gospel is a commission to disseminate that which we declare as Good News. Perhaps if there was a similar enthusiasm for uncovering this kind of truth, then the phrase "News of the World" might conjure up a whole different image within our popular imagination.

Loving God

You have called us to be bearers of Good News.

Forgive us, if at times our appetite has been for news of a different kind.

Help us to confront within ourselves,

Those aspects of human nature

Which these recent events

Have thrown into such sharp relief.

We pray for everyone affected by the closure of News of the World;

Particularly those who have lost their livelihood

Through circumstances that are not of their making.

We pray for journalists and all who work within the media.

Protect them from the pressure

To act in ways which are wrong.

Help us all to pursue honesty,

Respect privacy,

And to truly pursue the common good

In that which we seek to know and make known.

Through Jesus Christ,

Author and provider of that which can be eternally known

As Good News.

Amen.

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