

Outrage and privacy

July 17th 2011, Trinity 4

There are two wider aspects of the phone hacking scandal that have not been considered in the media, and which relate to today's scriptures. They raise deeper questions for us to reflect on. First, what does the widespread sense of outrage signify? Is it the sign of some fundamental sea change in our attitude to public morality? We do of course have to allow for the fact that when the press is in full hue and a cry there is a great deal of simulated rage. Also of course for the fact that there are major commercial considerations at stake here. But even allowing for all that, the very fact that a best selling newspaper has had to close indicates there is something deeply serious in the public mood.

It is always easy for those of us who were brought up in an earlier era to feel that some standards have slipped badly. Not all of course, and in many ways we are a more humane and moral society now than we were 60 years ago. But we cannot help feeling that principles of truth telling and probity, of faithfulness and public service have given way to rampant individualism and inordinate self-interest. We may or may not be right, and perhaps only historians of the future will be able to make any kind of objective judgement. But be that as it may, as the respected secular thinker Tony Judt put it in the opening sentence of the book he wrote just before he died "Something is profoundly wrong with the way we live today."¹ And the question is, whether our society as a whole is waking up to this, and if it is will we be able to establish a stronger moral framework for our economic, political, social and personal lives? One indication that things might be on the move was the proper anger against the selfish irresponsibility and greed of bankers and those in cahoots with them, who brought our whole financial house of cards tumbling down. Another indication that

¹ Tony Judt, *Ill Fares the Land*, Allen Lane, 2010

things might be on the move was the parliamentary expenses scandal. Most members of Parliament acted within what they took to be the rules at the time-but the general public was not impressed. It may for the most part have been legal, but it struck them as dishonourable. The present sense of outrage over phone hacking might be another indication that the tectonic plates of our society are beginning to shift.

However, today's gospel has a relevant warning. When it is pointed out to the farmer that weeds were springing up with the wheat in his newly sown field- and should they not be pulled out, he replies "No, in gathering them you might pull up the wheat at the same time. Let them both grow together till harvest. (Matthew 13, 29). There is a bit of most of us which thinks, "If only..if only we could exclude all the nasty people then we would have a true church or a better world." This tendency has of course been very strong in certain forms of Puritanism, the desire to create a church of the perfect, with others excluded. But this inclination is seriously misguided. One reason is that it is often the case that our strongest and weakest qualities are closely intertwined. The mover and shaker who gets things done may find it difficult to avoid arrogance and insensitivity. The nice person, always out to please others may find it difficult to find enough courage to stand out on their own. Even more seriously is the fact that the field of human life cannot in fact be divided into two sets of people, the good and the bad. The wheat and the tares are both sown in our own hearts. And this of course points to the heart of the Christian gospel. We stand in a right relationship with God not because we are perfect, not because we try harder than others, but simply because his grace in Jesus holds us close to himself. As Paul Tillich put it in famous words many years ago. It is about our acceptance of God's acceptance of us even if we feel we are unacceptable.

So the challenge is to work for higher standards in our national life whilst also looking to our own hearts and lives.

The other issue raised by the scandal concerns the value which is at stake here. There has been no discussion of why we think phone hacking matters. People feel it is wrong, but why? What is at stake here? There is of course a proper debate to be had about the public interest, but this assumes a prior value to be taken into account. This is of course privacy, and it is worth reflecting on what privacy is about. What it points to is the fundamental value of respect for the otherness of the other. Other people are other. They are not extensions of ourselves, they are not to be treated as objects or instruments for the achievement of our purposes. They are other- and this means respect for the fact that what and how they open their mind or heart to us is entirely their choice. They choose to let us into their lives. They invite us into their space-their house-their room-their mind-their telephone conversation. It is theirs to invite or not.

This value is of course one aspect of the respect for the individual as such which has been given to us by our Judaeo-Christian heritage. If we want to see what is at stake we only have to think of the kind of world set before us in novels like 1984 or A Brave New World in which it is the state which is fundamental, controlling our minds as well as our bodies.

So the public is right to be alarmed. What is at stake is not just the breaking of a law-not just a fundamental human right to privacy, which there is, but the value of what it is to be a person made in the image of God, with an otherness even from God which God respects.

D.H.Lawrence had a love hate relationship with the Christian faith but in one little poem he captures wonderfully well what is required of us here.

To be humble before other men is degrading. I am humble before
no man
and I want no man to be humble before me.

But when I see the life-spirit fluttering and struggling in a man
I want to show always the human tender reverence.²

So what is at stake here is the otherness of other people and the
basic respect which such otherness calls for –even perhaps that
human tender reverence .

² D.H.Lawrence, “Tender Reverence” in The Complete Poems, ed. Vivian de sola Pinto and Warren Roberts, Vol II, Heinemann, 1972, p.622