

Sidetracked Saints

Matthew 6:24-34

9th Sunday in Pentecost

25th July 2010

I wonder if you watch the long running *Law & Order* series on TV. I particularly like these episodes that start with a seemingly ordinary, local kind of crime. But, as the story goes on, they turn out to have hidden dimensions relating to broader, contemporary issues, even sometimes with international ramifications.

Here's just such a story that might well have come from the pages of *Law & Order: Scotland* – if there was such a series. The only difference is that it's fact not fiction.

Back in February 1997, a 51 year old Scottish woman, Isabel Ross, was murdered in her home in Kilmarnock, just south of Glasgow. A local handyman, David Asbury, who had done some home renovation work for Mrs. Ross, was arrested and charged. At his trial, the case against him seemed fairly solid, based largely on finger-prints. However, the defence lawyers argued that the finger-print evidence was suspect because other prints had been found at the scene of the crime, particularly those of another police officer who was not involved in the investigation. They pointed to a police woman, Detective Constable Shirley McKie¹ but she maintained she was never at the crime scene and was charged with perjury.

At her trial in 1998, two internationally recognised fingerprint experts² were due to give evidence for Ms. McKie, testifying that the prints were not hers and so could not have been at the scene of the crime. However, before these experts could appear in court, they were visited by high-level FBI agents who pressured them to change their evidence and testify that the fingerprints were those of the policewoman.

Everyone wondered at the time why the FBI would have such an interest in a seemingly low-profile case in a relatively small country. But then the significance of their interest began to emerge as it related to another trial due to take place in the near future – that of two Libyans charged with the downing of Pan Am 103 over Lockerbie, Scotland, in 1988. This case also hinged largely on finger-print evidence that had been processed by the very same crime scene investigators who had allegedly made mistakes with Ms. McKie's fingerprints. If their work in the McKie case was suspect then it might also be deemed to be suspect in the Lockerbie case. The FBI feared that fingerprint evidence presented at the lesser trial might taint evidence of the same nature at the more important trial to follow. And so the conviction of the Libyans might be jeopardised.³

After all these years, the case of the one convicted Libyan, Abdelbaset Al Megrahi, still rumbles on and continues to make headlines. After being convicted in 2001, Megrahi served 8 years before being released on compassionate grounds, allegedly suffering from advanced prostate cancer. Now, US senators are pressing for an enquiry into the circumstances of

his release and also whether or not it might have been tied to an oil deal between BP and Libya ... Let me think about that. US senators alleging others are making secret deals with big oil companies? Now, if that's not a case of the pot calling the kettle black!!

The problem with the whole Lockerbie case is that American politicians and law-enforcement agencies have suffered from tunnel vision over the years. They have become so obsessed with the Libyan connection to the exclusion of all else. So much so they have failed to see that the evidence against Megrahi was very tenuous at the best of times and that there were always many other more likely suspects, especially in Iran and Syria.⁴

Americans have become distracted where this issue is concerned much in the same way they did when they launched the war in Iraq, wrongly believing that it was related to the war against terrorism. By failing to concentrate their efforts and resources on the real area of threat in international terrorism which is Afghanistan, needless casualties and deaths have been caused, not least of all to the Canadian military. American political leaders took their eyes off the ball, so to speak. They lost their focus. They became sidetracked.

Of course, it's not only people in the higher echelons of public life that get sidetracked. We all run that temptation constantly. Distractions are everywhere these days. For instance, we may set out early in life with a defined career plan, dedicating ourselves to making a difference in the world through selfless service. But then we are distracted by easier ways of making a living and our lofty principles get forgotten. Or, we are going to do so many things with the children or grandchildren as they grow up but then other seemingly more important social events distract us eating up the time we should spend with them. Then how often at work are we distracted from the task at hand by the latest scuttlebutt about a fellow employee? Or, at home, a titillating TV talk-show can easily distract us from clearing out the closet. Not to speak of how many drivers are distracted by cell phones and other things when driving their cars.

In pointing the finger at others who get sidetracked, we must confess, therefore, that we are all prone to this temptation. And nowhere does happen more often than in the church. Not, of course, that anyone ever gets distracted during my sermons! I have long been aware that my listeners are fully engaged 100% of the time I am preaching! Never do they think about such mundane things as "Where will we go for lunch today?" or "How many pipes are there in the organ loft?" No, never!

But we do tend to get sidetracked in other areas of the

church's life where we all too easily, and all too often, forget our central goal and purpose. We go off at tangents that have nothing really to do with what we should be doing or, more importantly, with what Christ wants us to do.

I wonder if you ever watch the show "The Vicar of Dibley" about a woman Anglican priest, serving in an English village? At the parish council meetings a motley crew of church members sit around supposedly discussing the pressing business of church and community. Chairman David Horton, with his upper-class accent and condescending ways, valiantly tries to impose some semblance of order on the assembled parish committee, constantly trying to focus their minds on the issues at hand. But despite his best efforts, everyone goes off at the most divergent tangents imaginable. While the vicar is trying to find a date for the parish fete, Owen insists on discussing the state of pig dung on his farm, while Jim, the old curmudgeon, discourses at length on whether the "Great Storm of 47" was worse than the "Great Freeze of 63". Five hours later, after exhausting every possible alternative date for the fete and succumbing to every distraction possible, someone suddenly discovers it can be held on the original date after all.⁵

Is this not a parable of the contemporary church? Rather than staying tightly focused on the central issues of faith and service and mission, we constantly get side-tracked, diffusing our energies on secondary issues and avoiding the central challenge of being the church in the 21st century. We Christians have taken our eyes off the ball, so to speak, and all with the result that we have lost our effectiveness and cutting-edge in today's world, no longer challenging people's complacencies, no longer changing people's hearts and minds for the better, no longer transforming our world into a more just and compassionate place, as we are called to do.

A lot is said in the Bible about encouraging the people of God to avoid distraction and to become more focused. St. Paul says that the Christian needs to be just as focused as the runner in a race. "One thing I do: Forgetting what lies behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus."⁶ The writer of the Book of Hebrews echoes this, "Since we are surrounded by such great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight ... and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us."⁷ And nowhere is this message more clearly emphasised than in the Sermon on the Mount. Reminding his disciples they should not worry about matters of human existence such as eating, drinking and clothing, Jesus says, they should focus rather on spiritual matters and all these other concerns will take care of themselves. "But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness," he tells them, "and all these things will yours as well."⁸

In times when we get so easily distracted in our service of the church, these words of Jesus remind us exactly where our true focus should be. On advancing God's kingdom. On furthering the cause of Christ. On telling people about his love. And showing forth that love in terms of practical service.

It's very easy to think that our principal business as a church is to keep a building in existence, to count numbers in the pews, to attend meetings, to raise money, to socialise, to enjoy sacred music and to listen to sermons. But while these are all important components of our involvement with the church, we must remember they are not the central purpose and we must avoid being distracted by them. Our central purpose, rather, is seeking and serving and building God's kingdom, bringing people to faith, ministering to a needy world in his name. All our other activities are a means to serving this end and we must never forget it. As Jesus says, "Seek first the kingdom of God."

Writer Richard Ferris tells how in the 1957 World Series, New York was playing the Milwaukee Braves in the World Series when Yogi Berra was the catcher for the Yankees and Hank Aaron was the chief power hitter for Milwaukee. "As usual," Ferris says, "Yogi was engaged in his ceaseless chatter, intended to pep up his team-mates on the one hand and distract the Milwaukee batters on the other. As Aaron came to the plate, Yogi tried to distract him by saying, 'Henry, you're holding the bat wrong. You're supposed to hold it so you can read the trademark.' Aaron didn't say anything, but when the next pitch came he hit it into the left-field bleachers. After rounding the bases and tagging up at home plate, Aaron looked at Yogi Berra and said, 'I didn't come up here to read. I came to hit home runs.'"⁹

Oh, if only we Christians could, like Hank Aaron, keep our focus on what really matters and refuse to be distracted by secondary things, how much more we could achieve for God and his kingdom in this world in which we live today!

© George A. Turner
St. Paul's Presbyterian Church
Peterborough, Ontario

¹ Richard W. Ferris, "Enjoy The Scenery", Sermons for Sundays: In Lent and Easter: Temptation of the Palms, CSS Publishing Company, Inc., 2004, 0788023241b

² David Grieve, senior fingerprint expert at Illinois State Police and Pat Wertheim, fingerprint examiner for the Arizona Department of Public Safety

³ Eddie Barnes, "Cover-up, conspiracy and the Lockerbie bomb connection", www.scotsman.com, Sunday 19 February 2006, plus many other articles on Shirley McKie in this section.

⁴ Donald Goddard, Lester Coleman, *Trail of the Octopus*, Bloomsbury Publishing, London, 1993

⁵ Dawn French, "The Vicar of Dibley", BBC, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/comedy/vicarofdibley>

⁶ Philippians 3:14

⁷ Hebrews 12:1

⁸ Matthew 6:33

⁹ Richard W. Ferris, "Enjoy The Scenery", Sermons for Sundays: In Lent and Easter: Temptation of the Palms, CSS Publishing Company, Inc., 2004, 0788023241b