

Sermons, Speeches & Addresses

Hillsborough: a Personal Perspective

(speaking in the Chaplaincy at Edge Hill University)

April 2013



I accept only a few invitations to speak about the work of the Hillsborough Independent Panel. I choose the occasions thoughtfully. I am here today because this University played an important role in the Hillsborough narrative through the work pioneered by Professor Phil Scraton who has now moved to Queens University Belfast.

Phil was a member of the Panel and his knowledge and research expertise were central to the Panel's work but I am here also because the invitation has come through the Chaplaincy to give my own perspective which inevitably is bound up with me being the Bishop of Liverpool.

The 20th Anniversary was the turning point for the families and survivors. If you had rehearsed the crowd of over 30,000 people they could not have been in greater unison in their chanting for justice for the 96. The size of the crowd and the volume of the chant demonstrated that the wound of Hillsborough was open and sore; it was infected with what the families knew to be lies and was deprived of the ointment of truth.

For me as a pastor of the city the words of faith that came through so strongly on that day were *"to heal the broken hearted"*.

Andy Burnham went from the stadium and after much negotiation with politicians and officials was responsible for the Home Secretary, Alan Johnson, setting up the Hillsborough Independent Panel. Our terms of reference were to oversee the maximum possible disclosure, to write a report that added to public understanding of the tragedy and its aftermath and to make recommendations on the establishing of a national archive. The Panel was also required to liaise with the families.

There was such a history of distrust of public authorities that one of the early issues was how the Panel would secure the confidence of the families. We decided that we would meet the families on the very first day that the Panel members met each other. This proved formative. Indeed the encounter with the three family groups provided the glue that bound the Panel together throughout its work. We listened carefully to all the questions that were raised which formed a map on which we worked. The Panel and the Secretariat met regularly with representatives of the various groups. During these meetings I was often told that the Panel was the families' last hope. Movingly we were also told that this was the first time that they felt that they were being taken seriously and being listened to.

It is one of the major aspects of the Panel's work that we were able to engage with the families so constructively. As a Panel we were interrogating documents and not people. This meant that the process was not encumbered in the way that inquiries are with the necessary involvement of lawyers. The problem with inquiries is that they often rebuff or at least keep at a distance the very people most affected. The Panel was able to draw them into the process.

The chant on the terraces gave voice to the basic instinct of the families and survivors which was to seek justice for the 96. This gave me and my colleagues cause to reflect upon the meaning of justice. It is to give someone their due. It is as I quoted from a 4th Century Christian Philosopher *"to give to others through humanity what we give to our family through affection"*.

A person has a right to know how and why their loved one died. I remember making this point to a Cabinet Minister after the General Election. The incoming Government was not bound by the decision of the previous

Government so the case had to be made to the four sponsoring departments that the work of the Panel should continue. When in one conversation I was rightly pressed to make the case I heard myself saying to a Cabinet Minister "If 20 years on you still did not know how or why your child had been killed I think you too would still want to know the answers to those questions". To the Cabinet Minister's credit the point was taken.

I would here pay tribute to Theresa May the Home Secretary who following in the footsteps on Alan Johnson has given wholehearted support to the Panel's work.

If I began the work thinking that the justification for me as a Bishop spending so much time was the hope of healing the broken hearted then by the end of it I was under no illusion that what was at stake was the delivery of justice to those that had been denied it.

Every day for three months before the disclosure of the material and the publication of the report in my daily prayers I read the parable of the unjust judge in Luke Chapter 18. I would like to read it to you now, the theme of this allegory seemed to have so much resonance with the Hillsborough narrative.

Then Jesus told them a parable about their need to pray always and not to lose heart. He said, "In a certain city there was a judge who neither feared God nor had respect for people. In that city there was a widow who kept coming to him and saying, „Grant me justice against my opponent.“ For a while he refused; but later he said to himself, „Though I have no fear of God and no respect for anyone, yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will grant her justice, so that she may not wear me out by continually coming.“” And the Lord said, "Listen to what the unjust judge says. And will not God grant justice to his chosen ones who cry to him day and night? Will he delay long in helping them? I tell you, he will quickly grant justice to them. And yet, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?"

On the Panel we had several discussions about where we should convene the meeting to disclose the documents and publish the report. Our terms of reference made it clear that it was the families themselves who must first hear the outcome of our work. In the end we all agreed that the Cathedral provided the best place. It offered the families and survivors security and a safe place to hear what we knew by then would be traumatic material. It allowed them protection from the media especially as they absorbed this difficult information. It allowed them to regain their composure before being exposed to the world's media and it provided a suitable place in which they could remember with reverence their 96 loved ones.

Chairing the proceedings that day felt to me like taking the funeral of someone you love when you have to tighten the valve on your own emotions. As the media reported three people fainted when Bill Kirkup the Medical Director revealed the findings of the post mortems. After the initial presentation which lasted an hour and a half two men came to the podium to take the microphone. They came to apologise for not having trusted the Panel. This is before the Prime Minister came to the Despatch Box in the House of Commons to apologise on behalf of the Government and the nation for „the double injustice“ that the families and survivors have had to endure.

At the end of the day as I bade the families farewell commending them for their patience and endurance I told them that I would go to the Chapter House which the Dean had turned into a Chapel for the 96. I turned around and walked through the Cathedral. For the next hour as I knelt in my stall so many of the 250 who had gathered that day followed me into the Chapel to remember the 96 and to pray. My prayer was that truth and justice would prevail in God's world. I think it was the only time I mentioned God in the three years. Throughout the last 24 years and indeed on that day September 12th, 2012 the families conducted themselves with exemplary dignity. The reaction in the city was one of extraordinary solidarity. Yet it was a bitter sweet vindication. Here at last was the proof that the families had not campaigned in vain. Yet in this disclosure came not only a reliving of the tragedy but new doubts and grief, "what if....."

I am very willing to take questions or listen to observations but clearly what I am not able to do is to comment on the substance of the report. This now has been given to the Independent Police Complaints Commission, the Department of Public Prosecution and to the newly appointed Coroner Lord Justice Goldring. The Panel has interrogated the documents and produced a report that adds to public understanding of the tragedy and its aftermath. The different judicial processes now set in train must interrogate those who are implicated by the documents. In order for justice to be done these processes need to proceed justly.

The necessary involvement of lawyers representing the different parties will inevitably have an impact on the timescale. My hope is that these judicial procedures will be expedited as efficiently and as speedily as possible. The next anniversary of Hillsborough will mark a quarter of a century. It has been a long night of dark and sorrow; but there are signs of a new day dawning.

In the end God alone is judge and knows the secrets of our hearts. But standing this side of eternity I believe that serving as Chair of the Panel may prove to be the most important aspect of my ministry as Bishop of Liverpool.

I could not have done it without the excellence of my colleagues in both the Panel and the Secretariat; nor could I have done it without the support of my colleagues in the Diocese of Liverpool. I could not have done it without my wife Sarah and my own family – it is that ‘family love’ that lies at the heart of the Hillsborough narrative which is why the families out of their own love for the 96 can do no other than honour their memory with truth and justice. That’s their due and ours too.