



Living with guilt

So David Duckenfield, the policeman in charge of the Hillsborough fixture in 1989, is now to be taken to court on charges of manslaughter, twenty eight years on from his alleged offence.

I wonder what it is like to live knowing that you have committed such a crime. Duckenfield's case is distinctive in that his initial mistake at least was just that: a mistake made by someone caught in a situation he was incapable of dealing with: he never set out to hurt anybody. Tragically, while it was not intentional, his mistake that day led to 96 deaths.

The desire to evade justice is deeply ingrained in humanity. After Cain has killed his brother Abel in the fourth chapter of Genesis, the LORD asks him,

"Where is Abel your brother?"

Cain takes the high ground, answering:

"I do not know: am I my brother's keeper?"

only for the LORD to dismantle his resistance:

"What have you done? The voice of your brother's blood is crying to me from the ground."

But without God's voice to make it clear, how do consciences work?

In Duckenfield's mind, perhaps he feels that one hour of bad policing can hardly be loaded with 96 deaths. He may have justified his continued freedom to himself by arguing that the continued publicity about him was punishment enough. This is not the sort of logic

that would work for victims, but could well be in his mind for himself. Cain had actually bludgeoned his brother to death, but still tried to argue his way out of it, after all.

What we learn from history is that it is astonishing how people can indeed live on, in denial of their crimes. Franz Stangl, the commandant of Treblinka in World War II, escaped to Brazil and was only captured in 1967. While in prison, the writer Gitta Sereny interviewed him for weeks until on 27th June 1971, the dialogue went like this: she writes,

"My conscience is clear about what I did, myself", Stangl said... But this time I said nothing. He paused and waited, but the room remained silent. "I have never intentionally hurt anyone, myself," he said, with a different, less incisive emphasis, and waited again - for a long time. For the first time, in all these many days, I had given him no help. There was no more time. He gripped the table with both hands as if he was holding on to it. "But I was there", he said then, in a curiously dry and tired tone of resignation. These few sentences had taken almost half an hour to pronounce. "So yes," he said finally, very quietly, "in reality I share the guilt... Because my guilt... my guilt... only now in these talks... now that I have talked about it all for the first time..." He stopped.

Extraordinarily, 19 hours after the interview, Stangl died from a heart attack. Now that he had made the realisation, he literally could not live any more.

June 2017. *Thought for the Train* is a short column written by the Reverend Robert Stanier, the vicar of St Andrew and St Mark, Surbiton, for people to read on the train, or elsewhere. www.surbitonchurch.org.uk. You can find this online at <http://surbitonchurch.org.uk/category/thought-for-the-train/>