



## Lies, leaks and secrets

It is quite clear that the former Defence Secretary Gavin Williamson does not believe that he is responsible for leaking the discussion of a meeting of the National Security Council. He has sworn on his children's lives that he didn't do it.

But that doesn't mean he didn't do it.

And, of course, I have no idea about the ins and outs of this particular political hoo-haa. What I do know quite a lot about is how we humans have a tendency to lie even when we believe we aren't.

Thomas Cranmer, in his brilliant prayer of confession from 1549, lays out a text in which the congregation confesses that that we "have erred and strayed like lost sheep; we have followed too much the devices and desires of our own hearts, and there is no health in us."

On the one hand, this is language from half a millennium ago; on the other hand, is this not describing an utterly contemporary phenomenon? Instinctively, we know what Cranmer means by 'devices and desires'; how we explain away sins, with all sorts of elaborate techniques. One is to point at someone else whose sin is more egregious: my life may be relatively luxurious, but you should see the people who live up the road.

Another is to acknowledge a part of the truth, but minimise the whole: you may remember in 'Notting Hill, that the Hugh Grant character has sworn his

housemate Spike, played by Rhys Ifans, to total secrecy about the fact that the film star Anna Scott, played by Julia Roberts, has spent the night at his house. Grant opens up the front door to be confronted by paparazzi, and clearly the world now knows his secret. He challenges Spike:

"Ah," says Spike, "I may have told one or two people down the pub."

So good are we at this obfuscation, that we are all brilliant barristers acting in our own defence. In this, it's actually liberating to believe in an omniscient God. There is no need to pretend before him; he knows.

Of course, there are times when it goes the other way. Soometimes, in a confession, the penitent "overconfesses": they confess to an action which they have regarded as sinful but isn't sinful at all, just something about which they feel shame. But my sense is that more often, the tendency is to minimise.

Whether this is true of Williamson, only God and he knows (and the journalist, of course), but I wonder if this ability to minimise is also relevant to #metoo issues. Men (and it's almost always men) half-genuinely believe that their groping was innocent; in the devices and desires of their heart, they have minimised it to something perfectly natural. But if they are to see rightly, they will disentangle those devices, and allow the truth to come out. And show remorse.

*March 2019 Thought. for the Train is a short column by the Rev'd Robert Stanier, vicar of St Andrew and St Mark, Surbiton, for people to read on the train. You can also read "Thought for the Train" at [www.surbitonchurch.org.uk](http://www.surbitonchurch.org.uk).*