

NO STORY, NO MEANING

BY COLIN GREENE

Sunday 31 August 1997 will remain indelibly imprinted upon the corporate memory of the British Isles as one of the saddest days of recent history. The death of Diana, Princess of Wales, and Dodi al-Fayed in a car crash ranked alongside the assassination of President J F Kennedy as a day many will never forget. Diana's life and death has been transformed into one of the great contemporary dramas of our era. The media coverage of the events surrounding her death was both intense and, at times, intrusive. What was almost entirely lacking, however, was the ability of political, media and religious commentators to link her own story of personal triumph and tragedy to that other great story of triumph in adversity upon which our culture was founded. If there is no story in the public domain which tells us who we truly are, why we are here, and what contribution we can make to life, then all our personal stories and journeys of faith are ultimately without foundation and meaning. Here, Colin Greene explores some of the issues and challenges which confront the local church in the aftermath of this tragedy.

From beginning to end, the Bible tells a story of personal exploration and development. It is a journey, just like Diana's and countless others, towards maturity and corporate responsibility. It is a story interlaced with all the poignancy, passion and perversity of what it means to be a human being. And yet it is also a story of God's self-declaration and journeying with us, a God who suggested that his own nature and identity would be revealed in what he does amongst us: "I will be who I will be." It is the story of the God whose most deeply personal and vulnerable self-expression is encapsulated in a life which also began in obscurity and ended in apparent tragedy.

Narrative and Promise

Without such a narrative underpinning our own sense of social and cultural identity, there is nothing to stop our distress degenerating into hopeless sentimentality or endless recrimination and self-examination at times of national grief. Without a promise that has ultimately to do with what Jesus enshrined, the expansion and enrichment of our own lives through the love of God and neighbour, then the activities of the *paparazzi* become just another response to the moral and religious vacuum created by the ideology of the free market.

Appropriate Language

The loss of this biblical perspective in people's consideration of the ultimate meaning and purpose of life has disastrous social and political consequences. David Hay is just one of many commentators who has identified that this loss has, for most people, transformed spirituality into an embarrassing personal secret which "dissipates its potential to change society because it does not feed into public understanding or legislation". Similarly, Robert Bellah notes in his important book *Habits of the Heart* that American public life has lost the Judeo-Christian language of communitarian and corporate responsibility. Consequently, many Western people are not able to find an appropriate language in which to frame their social and moral decisions and commitments.

Re-engagement

If the local church is to effectively engage with contemporary society, our starting

point must be the need to enable people to re-engage with the Bible, not just as a text, a compendium of doctrine or a glossary of religious experience, but as a narrative which includes *everyone* and is re-echoed in countless other stories of human suffering and endeavour.

This story claims to be public truth because it is rooted in history and holds together personal spiritual growth and corporate social and political responsibility. And yet the Church is now faced with the challenge of re-engaging culture with this story at a time when, interestingly, a decline in church attendance has been matched by a growing interest in spirituality in general, a phenomenon which was manifested in a variety of ways before and after Diana's funeral. However, unless people's spirituality is rooted in a journey of faith and an exploration of discipleship which underpins reality, the spiritual quest easily degenerates into narcissistic self-absorption or hopeless escapism.

The **Revd Dr Colin Greene** is Head of Theology and Public Policy at Bible Society. He spent 11 years in parish ministry in the Diocese of Leicester, and lectured in systematic theology at Trinity College, Bristol.

All rights reserved. Permission is given for a single copy to be made for private and personal use. Beyond this, no part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying or otherwise without prior permission from Bible Society.

For permission requests, please email permissions@biblesociety.org.uk or telephone Bible Society on 01793 418100.