

**Right to Privacy?
Christ Church at Aldo's Place
October 2007**

This week I entered a bizarre world, quite new to me, with its own language and literature. The world of celebrity. The world of Heat magazine.

It's a strange world. One that is absolutely up to the minute and on the pulse – and yet which really tells us nothing new at all. A world that deals with the most serious issues that there are – death, sickness, violence and family – but intersperses them with “shocking” pictures of people picking their noses or accidentally showing their pants.

It's fashionable of course, especially if you consider yourself to be middle class, to despise “celebrity” and all that it stands for. But I'm not so sure that's what we really think. Because I don't believe all those copies of OK, Hello and Heat magazines are bought solely by the readers of red top newspapers. And even BBC News 24, that stalwart of the middle class, has a weekly celebrity programme.

The truth is that we are all fascinated by famous people. Which ones varies from person to person – some of us love to know about sports men, others about pop stars, actors, politicians, “reality” TV winners, “it” girls, soap stars, authors or models.

And, a lot of the time, we are interested not only in their “professional” work but the rest of their lives as well. And who is to say what is “professional” and “personal” for famous people anyway.

- If a politician who talks about trust has an affair is that professional or private?
- If a pop star is a hero to many children but can't look after her children is that anybody else's business?
- If a model wears terrible clothes in her own time does that reflect on her career?
- If a princess dies in a terrible car accident is it worthy of news and pictures?

Anybody who follows, even if only very loosely, the world of celebrities and the world of the press, TV and internet publishers can't help notice that they have a love-hate relationship with famous people.

These people make their living, many of them a living of millions of dollars a year, from having their photo splashed on celluloid, TV screens and across the pages of the newspapers. But splash the wrong story and poor papers can get sued all the way to the high court by the very people they made rich.

On the other hand these same papers lure people in, print nice things about them, big them up and flatter them – only to turn on them with vicious, lying and hurtful stories as soon as some editor, who has never had to endure a pack of photographers camped outside his house, decides their time is up.

The European Convention on human rights, no less, provides that **everyone** has the right to respect for his private and family life, his home and his correspondence. It's a right that all sorts of famous people have attempted to have enforced through the courts over recent years – most famously Catherine Zeta-Jones and Michael Douglas when suing Hello! magazine for publishing photos of their wedding when they had had hundreds of thousands of pounds from OK! magazine to take them.

Do famous people have a right to privacy? Do we? Does this celebrity thing tell us anything important about ourselves and our culture? Should we trust any of these people?

Should we even care about any of this stuff or just reject the lot of them as a waste of space and do something else with our lives?

Unfortunately, or fortunately, we couldn't get any famous people here tonight to say what they think. But, like their nose pickings, sexual preferences and favourite recipes the views of famous people on fame are well documented...

So let's see what some of them think, and say, about all of this...

Power Point Presentation

So what's it all about? What is it about human beings that makes them want to sell pictures of themselves eating Cadbury's chocolate at their wedding and then makes them want to start a court case because someone takes a photo of them without their clothes on? What is it that would possess anyone to take pictures of a dying woman rather than trying to look after her? And does the Bible, a book completed 1750 years before the word celebrity was invented have anything to say about this? Does God care about celebrity? About privacy?

As far as I can tell the cult of celebrity we see around us is driven by a number of different things.

The famous person is caught between two conflicting, and almost universal, human desires. There is a desire to publicise ourselves and seek fame that has been

seen in human culture since the building of the tower of Babel.

But there is also a desire in us to stop people knowing about negative things. About our failures, our mistakes and our errors.

That's why so many celebrities are quite happy to milk the publicity machine when it suits them and people are saying how beautiful, tough, well dressed or rich they are... And why they love to run to the courts when the coverage turns to career threatening issues. What those issues are is pretty different from person to person. If you front a rock band doing drugs is probably career enhancing. If you're a *Blue Peter* presenter it probably isn't.

For us, the consumers of celebrity there are several motivations going on too. Celebrities give us a common culture – you can talk about Posh and Becks, Chanelle and Ziggy, Peter and Jordan or Ashley and Cheryl to loads of different people. Celebrity gossip is a cultural universal, an ice-breaker. Like talking about football, cars or clothes it gets you into a conversation with people you don't know without having to reveal anything about yourself – except, perhaps, that you read Heat magazine. We love celebrities because they give us something to talk about.

And we love celebrities because we are a bit envious of them. Or at least aspire to be like them. Not exactly like them perhaps. But who here can say they have never ever desired first class flights, the best food and drink, the nicest cars, or the adoration of others?

Finally we love celebrities because they're just people. We like to think they're pointless and stupid and a bit naff. It's part of the game.

Which is why being a famous person is such hard work. Unless you're meant to be famous as a bank manager or a nuclear scientist being a little bit silly, doing something not so good and messing up a bit are all quite good things for your career. A bit of bad stuff makes people seem edgy and popular. But if you're not very careful you cross the line and, like Jade Goody, are instantly rejected and vilified; in her case by newspapers whose views are arguably much more racist than Jade Goody has ever been.

So should we have a privacy law? What does the Bible say about all this?

Some people think of the Bible as nothing more than a compendium of ancient stories and advice with no relevance at all to the modern world.

Others see the Bible as a sort of desk diary. Tear off a new sheet every day and find a pearl of wisdom for a happier life.

But the purpose of this evening, and of all our Aldo's Place events, is to show that the Bible is neither of those things. It is not irrelevant, nor it is a treasure trove of nuggets for life that can simply be plucked at random from its pages.

Rather the Bible gives us an entire view of the world from the perspective of the God who made the world. So the Bible helps us to understand all that happens here.

The story of the human race, how we came to be here, how things are now and where it's all heading is all here – and so the Bible can tell us all the most important things we need to know about our culture of celebrity and how we can respond to it.

There are loads of things one could say about this issue but I've picked just four. If you've got other things you'd like to add or questions please do ask them afterwards!

I **We twist everything in our world**

The most important single thing that the Bible has to say about human being in our present state is that we are not good people.

The whole history of the human race is the history of people who neither love God nor other people as we should.

That's why it should be no surprise to us either that famous people do stupid things that they want to keep quiet OR that other people want to read about those things and use it to exert a kind of power or hold over the famous.

Our tendency to wickedness, seen in all but one of the human beings who have ever walked the earth, it the reason we need laws and rules. There has to be some sort of collective restraint to our greed and selfishness. What happens when society has no laws or rules or when there is no enforcement of the laws or rules that there are? Anarchy. Chaos. Misery. Look at the pictures of occupied Baghdad or flooded New Orleans. That is what happens when law breaks down. And it is one of the most powerful pieces of evidence in the world for the essential messed upness of humanity.

But such is the sickness of human nature that even when there are laws and rules we try to find ways to exploit and twist them to give maximum advantage to us.

One of the best examples of that is the whole crop of court cases recently involving premiership footballers charged with speeding along in their Range Rovers, Aston Martins and Bentleys. Instead of just settling the ticket like everyone else they have employed highly paid lawyers to argue that the speed cameras can't prove who was driving the car and that they themselves can't remember – because obviously you lend your £150k sports car to different people every day of the week!

The point of the law is to stop us driving like lunatics and injuring and killing other people's wives, children and grannies. But we treat the law like it's an inconvenience at best and a deliberate personal assault on our freedom at worst. That's what sin does. It makes us think we are the most important person in the world.

What's all this got to do with celebrities and privacy? Well simply this. The way we gawp at and treat famous people and the way they exploit their fame can never be solved by a law.

If we were to enact a privacy law in this country, as some countries have, you can bet with copper bottomed certainty that one of the main ways it would be used is by corrupt and dodgy politicians, sportsmen, actors and other famous people to cover up their immorality or even their crimes.

And if, as is the case at the moment, there is no privacy law you can see the daily publication of acres of pointless trivia that has no effect other than fuelling an obsession amongst some people about the details of the lives of the famous and making the life of anybody who happens to be in the limelight – whether they seek it or not – public property down to their brand of toilet paper, height, weight, children's school and carbon footprint.

There is no law devised by man that can change the essential problem. For the famous the problem is that they tend to think fame and the money that goes with it entitles them to buy things that money should not be able to buy – like the avoidance of justice. For the rest of us the problem is that we think that because the money of the famous comes from us we have a right to know everything about them.

That's not a problem that can be solved by any law – it's something that requires a change in our hearts.

2 We should know about people who affect our lives

One of the most often heard pleas from influential people as to why some unsavoury aspects of their lives should not have anything published about them is

that it doesn't affect how they do their job – acting, singing, politics, business or whatever.

But the view of the Bible is that this is, quite simply, nonsense. A whole book of the Bible – the book of Proverbs – is dedicated to the topic of how we should practically live in God's world. And one of its big themes is that you can't separate life up into neat little chunks. There isn't a "home" chunk and a "work" chunk and a "relationships" chunk and a "money" chunk that all operate independently of each other. Because that's not how people are.

Everything we do and think and say affects everything else we do and think and say. Our deeds are not independent of our character. If someone is not faithful to his wife that man is dishonest and deceitful. If someone is addicted to alcohol that person is not in control of their decision making even when they are sober.

Now most of the things that most people do have no impact on you or me whatsoever. So if the bloke who lives 2 streets down from you is an alcoholic that probably has almost no impact on you at all so it's not really in anyone's interest to publicise the fact.

But one of the features of celebrities is that what they do DOES affect the rest of us. If an MP can't be trusted to keep his trousers on how can he be trusted to be honest with his constituents problems? If a premiership footballer is considered a role model by thousands of boys it matters that he tries to avoid his speeding tickets.

If a minister of the church is meant to be not greedy for money it matters that people know how much he earns and how he lives.

If a newspaper editor tells people who to vote for it matters that we know what influences him one way or another.

Now obviously it's much better for people in the public eye to be transparent about these things so there's no need for them to be exposed.

But, in a messed up world, it is good to have a free press of people who can investigate wrongdoing amongst the influential and show it to us. Not so we can be all superior – because we're all messed up. But so that we can decide where to place our trust.

The problem with magazines like "Heat", which I've been reading this week is not that they tell us about famous people. But that they tell us all the wrong things. Or that they never distinguish which things are important and which are not.

The in-magazine advert for their web site: heatworld.com boasts that they'll tell us every time a famous person gets arrested, and it might be a good thing for people to know about that.

But they'll also tell us whenever they have a row, fall over, pick their nose, look ridiculous or fart.

The question to ask about that is not "who cares" – obviously lots of people care or Heat wouldn't sell 570,000 copies a week. The question is "should we care?" And the answer is NO. Because taking such an interest in the people who appear in Heat reduces them to mere entertainment – which we should not do even if it's what they want. And it demeans us too and encourages us to evaluate our own lives by bizarre standards of a few hundred people in the world and not in any relationship to reality.

3 Discretion is more important than privacy

It seems that one of the saddest things about being famous is that it makes it even harder to trust people than it is for the rest of us.

That person who you thought was your friend might say something that has a few people laughing at you in the office. But at least they're not able to slag you off to millions of people.

The celebrity gossip industry thrives on divorces, fallings out, sackings and disgruntled family members. Not just because these things are good stories for them – which they are. But because these people are the source of all the best stories.

This whole world thrives on tit-for-tat. Jordan slags off Victoria Beckham. So Victoria lays into her. And on and on and on.

In the book of Proverbs one of the characteristics most highly to be valued in a husband or wife, a son or daughter, a parent or friend is **discretion**.

The recognition that just because something has happened doesn't mean the whole world needs to know about it. That just because we don't like someone doesn't mean we have a right to broadcast the reasons, rational or not, for our prejudice.

Even the recognition that just because somebody has hurt or injured us in some way does not mean we have to take revenge – either by office gossip or going to Hello! Magazine.

And the reason that somebody with a view of the world shaped by the Bible, and, indeed, the most important thing the Bible has to say about privacy, is that...

4 We have no privacy from God

The God of the Bible is not a God who we have to keep informed about stuff. The God of the Bible is a God who knows everything about everything. He knows all about not only our words and deeds – the things of public record. He also knows all about our thoughts, our hearts and the secret things.

King David, the writer of the Psalms, who himself was rebuked by God for wicked behaviour which he thought no one had seen, wrote these words:

"Where can I flee from your presence? If I go up to the heavens you are there; if I make my bed in the depths you are there. If I rise on the wings of the dawn, if I settle on the far side of the sea, even there your hand will guide me, your right hand will hold me fast."

You might think that kind of information would make God like a kind of celestial "Heat" magazine. Knowing every trivial detail about us and exploiting it to his own advantage. Using our weaknesses and frailties to keep us in our place. Or, perhaps better, like Christos the director in the movie *the Truman Show* who manipulates every facet of life to keep Jim Carrey's Truman believing that the life he is living is real when, in fact, everything is controlled by the cameras.

But that's not what God is like. God knows everything about us. But his response to our weakness, failure and sin is not to spread it over the pages of the newspapers. It is to be sad about it. To weep over our wickedness. And to offer, in his son Jesus, to forgive us and transform us.

God tells us in the Bible that the secret things people have done and thought will be made known. Not so that those who are already broken and ashamed will be further humiliated. God is not like that.

For those who know that we are moral failures. That we have not lived as we should. Who have sought God's mercy and forgiveness there will be discretion. God will not broadcast your failures to the world. The Bible tells us that he removes our sin as far as the east is from the west – as far as you can possibly imagine. The Bible tells us that God forgets our sin when we trust in Jesus. Not an absent minded forgetting. But a deliberate, thoughtful forgetting. A removal from his mind,

The exposure of wickedness will come only for those who deny their wrongdoing and seek to suggest that God's judgment is not just.

God knows everything about us. And yet he still offers us forgiveness, a new start and, even better, offers to cover up our failures with the cloak of his own perfect goodness.

The problem with seeking fame, as so many have discovered in our world, is that it turns round and bites you. Fame is a vicious, untameable animal, out of your control. It is a god that that can destroy you even as it can make you.

The real God, the God who is there is not like that. Whether you acknowledge him or not he knows everything about you – more even that you know about yourself.

But trust him. Acknowledge him. Recognise his goodness and his goodness. And he will forgive, restore and change you through Jesus Christ.

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2007