

12th February 2021

Honesty

“A few honest men are better than numbers.”

Oliver Cromwell, Letter to William Spring, 1643

I came across two interesting characters in books I've been reading recently. One is Nicholas Tomacoff, “a thin-faced twenty-one-year-old” who came to London from St Petersburg in 1909. In the early years of the 20th century, London was a hotbed of anarchist activity, culminating in “The Houndsditch murders” in 1910 and the infamous “Siege of Sydney Street” in 1911. Tomacoff ingratiated himself into the inner circles of the anarchists through playing the balalaika in local clubs – for which, as it turned out, he was paid in glasses of lemonade. He repaid this kindness by becoming a police informant, and, for many years, was under police protection while he fed them important pieces of inside information.

The other is a conman called Robert (Parkins) Peters who, through a large part of the 20th century, lived his life in a web of deceit. Known in the Press as “Peters the Parson”, he faked university qualifications, perpetrated frauds on the Church and a variety of institutions, was deported from countries when his duplicity was uncovered and was a convicted bigamist. This “fantasist” lived with lies throughout his life so. No one is sure whether he knew what the truth was himself.

Perhaps I'll explore Tomacoff's “informant” angle another time, for no one likes a “grass” or a “snitch”, and, if he was honest with the Police, was he not, at the same time, dishonest with those who trusted him? But, for both Tomacoff and Peters, deceit is at the heart of their story.

Cromwell's statement above is important. A few honest people (or men, as it was for him) were better than numbers. Honesty mattered more than a whole battalion standing together and all spouting the same thing. Maybe they had “spin doctors” in Cromwell's day too, so that everyone was seen to be pushing “the party line”. No wonder he longed for a few who could stand up and tell the truth, who were known to be honest.

Would that we all lived by this advice from Proverbs 19:

Better the poor whose walk is blameless than a fool whose lips are perverse.

A prayer for today

Lord, let me honest with others, honest with you, and honest with myself. Amen.

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