

9th March 2021

Perfection

“It’s a delightful thing to think about perfection.”

Fanny Burney, Camilla (1796)

I indicated a couple of weeks ago that Sir Bernard Spilsbury, a Home Office pathologist from the early years of the 20th century, would be on a list of guests at my “fantasy dinner party”. Let me explain why ...

Spilsbury was at the forefront of the importance of expert medical and scientific witnesses in high profile court cases. His standing was secured in many *cause célèbres* of his day: the trial of Hawley Harvey Crippen, who murdered his “society” wife in 1910 and attempted to escape to Canada, disguising his mistress as a young boy; the conviction in 1915 of George Joseph Smith of “brides in the bath” notoriety; the case of Jean-Pierre Vaquier in 1924, a French inventor who poisoned the husband of his mistress. The work of Sir Bernard Spilsbury is at the root of my life-long fascination with forensic medicine and criminal trials.

There are two things I’d like to discuss with Sir Bernard. For one, he could convey difficult technical matters in a way juries could understand, communicating the most complicated issues with assurance and in plain language. I like that, for it’s something which should be fundamental to a preacher’s art. And for another, he was a perfectionist. His standards were incredibly high. Down to the finest detail, he wanted to get things right.

There is much to be commended in being a perfectionist. No matter what we turn our hand to, it deserves the best of us. There are, however, two downsides to this, both exhibited in Spilsbury’s life. First, his perfectionism meant he always believed himself to be right. There could be no opposite opinion. Second, it drove him to overwork. He put himself under unbelievable pressure, which, in the end, was too much for him.

Being a perfectionist *can* be a good thing. There are times when it’s essential. But beware of thinking you’re always right and driving yourself too hard. Do what you can do; keep your standards high; and then let it go. God wants you to do what you are able to do, and not what you can’t. And, in any event, he wants you to look after yourself so that you have more you can put to hand to tomorrow, whether it’s perfect or not ...

A prayer for today

Living God, you speak clearly of your love for me. That’s perfect enough! Amen.

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