

“... and that is why Hillsborough Happened”

By Jimmy McGovern

In the early part of 1989 a young copper was called out at night to a park in Sheffield. Masked men appeared and put a gun to his head. The young copper nearly died of fright. The men removed their masks and revealed themselves. They were police officers. It was all a sort of joke.

Unfortunately, the young copper's father failed to see the joke. He kicked up a stink. And eventually the Home Secretary, Douglas Hurd, became involved. He demanded that heads should roll so the Chief Constable of South Yorkshire sacked the officers involved and moved their boss, Chief Superintendent Brian Mole, to Bradford. Certain officers in South Yorkshire were a bit miffed about this and when a new man came in to take charge, they gave him very little co-operation. The new man was Chief Superintendent Duckenfield and one of his first tasks was the policing of a semi-final game at Hillsborough on the 15th of April 1989. And that is why Hillsborough happened – because the man in charge got little help from his men. They did not want 96 people to die. But they wanted the new man to make a mess of things. And he did.

I know this. I can't prove it, but I know it. The Hillsborough families know it. And that, above all, explains their anger, their sense of grievance.

The police at Hillsborough ordered a gate to be opened and thousands walked through it and 96 of them died. The man in charge lied immediately afterwards. He said the fans had smashed down the gate. There was a video recording of the police themselves opening that gate. And that night, somebody walked into Sheffield Wednesday control room and stole what he thought was the video of the police opening that gate.

The control room was locked and alarmed. There were police all over the ground. Mrs. Thatcher was arriving in the morning. Ninety six people had died. Yet somebody was allowed to walk in and steal evidence. Who investigated this theft ? The South Yorkshire Police themselves. The thief, of course, was never found. And that, too, explains the anger of the Hillsborough families.

Whilst the families were still identifying their loved ones, four South Yorkshire police officers took it in turns to lie to the press about fans urinating on, and stealing from, the dead. As Joan Tootle said to me (Joan lives just around the corner), “They put out kids in their graves. Did they have to spit on them as well ?”

This too explains the anger of the Hillsborough Families.

The police then changed their statements. Unbelievable, isn't it ? If we could all change our statements at will, there would be nobody in prison. Yet the police changed theirs and Lord Justice Stuart-Smith finds this quite acceptable. Police officers, whose duty it is to establish truth, changing their statements at will. That too explains the anger of the Hillsborough Families.

Where is Christ in all this ? For nine years the Hillsborough families have endured a slow crucifixion, so where is Christ in all this ? The Christ who went to the cross for Truth and Justice. The Christ who, in a fit of rage, drove the money-changers out of the temple. The Christ who stood up for the exploited and the oppressed.

I think he *is* at work. Just as He changed the world through his pain on the cross, so the Hillsborough families, through their pain, have changed things here.

In 1989 this city was being torn apart. Factory after factory closing. People utterly lost. Mrs. Thatcher proclaiming "There is no such thing as society." I was angry with the church then. "What is the point of a church," I thought, "that does not fight back and on behalf of its people?" The pain of Hillsborough changed all that. People came together to share a huge burden of grief. They did this at Anfield, yes, but they also did it in their church.

It changed other things too. The Taylor Inquiry established a lot of the truth of Hillsborough. But the inquest that followed was simply an opportunity for the police to repeat the lies they told immediately after Hillsborough. The families endured this. But, through their campaigning, through their pain, it will never be allowed to happen again.

The police officer responsible for Hillsborough retired on health grounds and, because of that, no charges were ever brought against him. The families endured this. A denial of Justice. But, because they endured it, it too will never be allowed to happen again.

And 1989 changed the game of football. Okay, there are fat cats in it now and prices are going through the roof but (if you can afford it) you can watch a game of football in comfort and safety. That ought to have been the case prior to 1989. Had the families of the victims of Burnden Park or Ibrox or Bradford campaigned as vigorously as the Hillsborough families, Hillsborough would never have happened. But, through their pain, their endurance and persistence, the Hillsborough families have ensured that it will never happen again is a football stadium in this country.

In 1989 the media thought of football supporters as scum. Or, at best, animals. Animals who had to be met at railway stations and herded along to a stadium and caged behind wire fences. It is that that persuaded the South Yorkshire Police that they could get away with their lies – these people who died were just scum. And their families were scum. Therefore treat them anyway we like; they might scream and shout a bit but they'll soon go away. Nine years later they haven't gone away. And those nine years of constant struggle against overwhelming odds have proved to the world that these people who died were not scum; they were beautiful, innocent human beings and they were loved. Loved. *That* has fired the Hillsborough campaign. Not revenge. Truth and Justice, yes, but above all, *love*. For love, Christ went to the cross. And for love, the families have endured a slower crucifixion, nine years of torment.

In 1989 most people in this city looked to the Labour Party for things like Truth and Justice and Equality. It was, after all, the People's Party, born of struggle for justice. Despite a long history of betrayal by its leaders, we still turned out and voted for it. Tony Blair and Jack Straw have once again betrayed us – they've slammed the doors of justice on the Hillsborough families. They must have thought they could do so with impunity – who else *could* we vote for? Who else *would* we vote for? Well, sorry, Tony, sorry, Jack, next time there *will* be an alternative. The families themselves will be standing for parliament.

And this transcends politics. There were people crying to the heavens for justice and those who had it in their power to provide justice, failed to do so. That is sinful. Had Christ been there on the day of Jack Straw's announcement, he would have blazed with anger; he would have driven every single Labour MP out of that room. The Hillsborough families will do that. Albeit in a slightly different way. They will ensure that these people pay the wages of sin. They will lose seats. And this country will be a better country for it.

The Hillsborough families continue to suffer but, through their suffering, the entire nation gains.
That is truly Christ-like.

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***NOTE**

During Easter, 1998, Jimmy McGovern wrote and read out the above article in a Liverpool church.

I was sent a copy by Jimmy and have cherished it for many years. To my mind it says so many things I would have wanted to say.

Thank you Jimmy for the drama documentary and for so much more.

- *Doreen Jones, mother of Richard who died at Hillsborough with his girlfriend Tracey.*