

Feathers or Millstones

Mary looked at the digital alarm on her bedside table for the umpteenth time and wondered if it was broken. Surely more than ten minutes had passed since she last looked at it? It still showed 2:45 a.m. Would this night never end? It wasn't unseasonably warm for November, but Mary was tossing and turning restlessly as if it were a summer heatwave.

She felt a rising tide of panic. Emotionally drained and desperately needing sleep, nothing she tried ushered in that blessed balm of restful oblivion. Her shattered plans for Saturday's fast-approaching AGM reverberated in her head, and a sinking feeling in her stomach signalled her fear that the Moderator's visit on Sunday would be a disaster.

What made it worse was that everything had seemed to be going so well just a few hours ago. Her morning pastoral visits had been uplifting, and her time with the Wednesday afternoon Mothers' and Toddlers' group had filled her with joy.

She had enjoyed her first year as Minister. The congregation at Christ Church URC had welcomed her with open arms. (Even if she did think that some of the enthusiasm might have stemmed from more than two years without a Minister.) Her sermons had been well received, and her attempts to modernise the services by introducing videos and participative prayer hadn't led to an exodus (despite mutterings from certain quarters close to the organist and choirmaster). Even the church finances, while not abundant, were surprisingly healthy for a small church.

So, as she rang the doorbell of John Burton's flat, Mary had no premonition of disaster. John had been a member of the congregation for several years. A respected opinion leader of the congregation's more progressive wing, he had also organised a party from the church to attend Mary's ordination. He had been supportive of her modernisation programme.

Mary was having tea with John in preparation for Saturday's AGM. Several members had proposed that he should fill the vacant slot on the eldership, and members would vote on the proposal on Saturday. Mary needed to discuss some administrative details with him.

It was when Mary introduced the topic of DBS that everything went wrong. She knew that John was knowledgeable about church matters from his contribution to church life and the things he said in church meetings. So when she mentioned to John that all Elders had to have DBS checks at Christ Church, she was surprised to see his face flush with colour. At the same time, he shifted uncomfortably in his seat.

"In that case," he had said, "there's something you need to know. Nobody else in the church knows. Can I tell it to you in confidence? Who else can I tell if not you?"

Mary did her best not to show her growing alarm at John's story. The enhanced DBS check would reveal that John Barton wasn't his real name. He had been a chartered accountant and treasurer of a church in Morecombe. He had developed a gambling addiction, got out of his depth, and embezzled money, first from his firm's clients' accounts and then from the church. He had been discovered, prosecuted, and sentenced to three years. Whilst in prison, he had started a rehabilitation programme, and in the twenty years since his release, he had avoided backsliding. Fifteen years ago, he had changed his name by deed poll.

Mary sympathised with John's plight and admired his courage in rehabilitation. But since the moment she returned to the Manse's safety, all her prior peace of mind had escaped

her. Her evening devotions were a washout as all thoughts returned to her dilemma. Should she block John's appointment as Elder, knowing what she now did? Or should she trust John and forgive his past misdeeds? Even revealing what she knew to one or two trusted elders carried risks. She remembered a Jewish story she had heard in theological college about words being like feathers from a pillow – once released, you couldn't put them back again.

But surely, wasn't Jesus' whole ministry about love and forgiveness? How could she do less than the Lord? She could see no way forward.

Now, sleepless in the darkness of her bedroom, John's words seemed to Mary more like millstones than feathers.