

## DON'T DISGRACE YOURSELF

Ryan Giggs.

Ryan Giggs, Ryan Giggs, Ryan Giggs, Ryan Giggs, Ryan Giggs, Ryan Giggs, Ryan Giggs.  
It's just nice to be able to say it.

If you are wondering whether I have gone completely bonkers,  
or developed some strange form of football-related Tourette's,  
then clearly you are not a person who reads the Sun or uses Twitter. Good for you.  
But in case you missed what was apparently the news story of 2011,  
eclipsing such minor matters as the global recession or the famine in East Africa,  
then let me fill you in.

Ryan Giggs is a footballer.

He plays for Manchester United, and he used to play for Wales,  
and, as it turns out, he has played away from home too.

Ryan Giggs has always had a public image as a squeaky-clean family man,  
not the kind of footballer who goes to strip clubs or has fights in bars,  
but the kind of boy that any girl would be happy to take home to meet her mum.  
He's always been an incredibly popular player in England and in Wales,  
and the reason for that is not just his skill on the field but his image off the field too,  
the sense everybody had that he was just a nice, normal guy, a good husband and dad.

Then in 2011, a voluptuous young glamour model by the name of Imogen Jones  
found herself the subject of a legal gagging order,  
preventing her from telling anyone the name of the married footballer  
with whom she had had a relationship.

The footballer had gone to great lengths to prevent the papers from printing his name,  
and so nobody knew who it was.

Well, nobody apart from the millions of people who looked it up on the internet,  
and then sent the information round the world via Twitter.

So the footballer tried to gag everyone who uses Twitter as well,  
and by the time MP John Hemming used Parliamentary Privilege  
to name Ryan Giggs in the House of Commons,  
a story which would have been tomorrow's chip paper  
turned into one of the biggest media storms of the year.

Poor Ryan Giggs.

All he wanted to do was to stop people saying he'd had an extra-marital affair.

But I can't help feeling he went about it in the wrong way.

Because, if you don't want people saying that you had an affair,  
there is a really easy way to do it:

just don't have the affair in the first place.

We tend to make a distinction in our minds between public people and ordinary ones.

In a way, it's only natural. Lots of people have all sorts of relationships,  
but the tabloids aren't really interested,

unless the people concerned are footballers, pop stars or, occasionally, vicars.

And so, we start to think that some people are “in the public eye.”

But actually, we are all public people.

I dare say that Anthony Worrell-Thompson doesn't give two hoots about *me* knowing he nicked cheese from Tesco's, it's the fact that his family and friends know that really stings.

And it would be exactly the same for you and me -

although I realise that in Lee-on-the-Solent

you'd probably be lynched just for going into your new Tesco's, even if you paid for your cheese.

So all of us have a public image to maintain, even if it's just for our friends and neighbours.

And that can be a positive thing - thinking about somebody else's hurt or disapproval can stop us giving in to all sorts of temptations.

But sometimes the need to maintain a public image can actually hold us back, and that is basically what has happened in the Epistle to Titus, some of which we have just heard read this evening.

The letter is said to be from Saint Paul, but it almost certainly wasn't written by him.

It comes from a later date in Christian development, when Christians were settled into Churches in particular locations, and their concerns had turned to the ordering of their communities and their place in wider society.

There is no evidence that the community of Titus was suffering any fierce persecution. Nobody was going to be thrown to the lions for being a Christian; it's just that their pagan neighbours seemed to think they were a bit odd.

And so the Letter to Titus responds with a long list of instructions of how Christians of all types should and should not behave.

The advice itself could be lifted out of any contemporary book of pagan Philosophy; admonitions to piety, uprightness and keeping the women in the kitchen appeared in all the most celebrated Graeco-Roman texts of the day.

But in the letter of Titus, this is not virtue for its own sake, or because it will help you get to heaven;

primarily, it's working on the Ryan Giggs principle:

if you don't do anything bad, nobody will have anything bad to say about you.

Of course, there is nothing wrong with moral behaviour and transparency.

But in the Epistle to Titus, you can almost see the radical nature of the Christian message cracking under the pressure to fit in to the norms of society.

Gone is Saint Paul's exhortation not to be conformed to the world, or radical counter-cultural preaching of Saint Stephen or Saint Peter in Acts.

The message is now: don't do anything to bring the Church into disrepute, don't draw attention to yourself, don't do anything to embarrass Christianity.

If Jesus had turned up in that community,

eating with prostitutes, encouraging the Samaritan woman to preach the Gospel, or turning over tables and trashing the Temple,

one almost suspects that the Christians would have crucified him themselves.

As Christians, we have a very real duty to be advertisements for the faith, to live our lives in ways that reflect the truth of the Gospel and the teachings of Christ; and of course, we should try to live good and moral lives - naughty vicar stories and hypocritical Christians do nothing to build the Kingdom. And sometimes we do need to adapt to the expectations and norms of the world in which we live, and the society to which we belong. The community of Titus wasn't being persecuted, but it had happened in recent memory, and it would happen again - and when you live in a dangerous and totalitarian regime, sometimes a certain amount of conformity is a smart plan. But if we sell out too much just for the sake of a quiet life, or because we are scared of embarrassment or disgrace, then we dishonour the radical nature of our faith, which has the potential to turn the world upside down.

Actually, I think that Christianity has had a bit too much of self-control and prudence, too many years of good repute. People are scared to come to Church because they think it's only for perfect people; they reject the faith because they think it's all about submission and conformity; they are reluctant to become Christians because they think we never have fun. And the worst of it is, too often, they are absolutely right.

I think it's about time we put Christianity back where it belongs - on the streets, in the pubs, in our workplaces, in the café and the betting shop and the seafront arcade. It's about time we stopped pretending that Christians are all goody two-shoes, and admitted that we are just as messed up as everyone else. There is a time and place for reverence, self-control and gravity, but, by God, there is also a time for letting your hair down and dancing on the tables. Most importantly, there is a time and place for Christians to stand up and speak out against some of the ways of the world: to model a way of life in which nobody is marginalised, in which people are not judged, where what matters is not money or status or fame or good reputation, but the simple fact that each of us is a child of God, beautifully created in his image. There is no disgrace in being a Christian, and there is no shame in being who you are. We are only an embarrassment to the Church when we behave in the way the world half-expects us to behave, narrow-minded, petty, squabbling, judgemental. We have an amazing, inspiring, radical faith which can set the world on fire: why on earth would we want to quench the Spirit by just being like everybody else?

As the singer Jarvis Cocker once famously said:  
"The only way you can really disgrace yourself  
is by being dead boring." Amen