

Thought for the Day 25th May - John Reed

Read Luke 18:9-14

We live in an increasingly litigious age. Whenever something bad happens, or something goes wrong, we look for someone to blame – and ideally, to sue for damages. We've seen an element of this in the demands for enquiries into the COVID-19 pandemic. Don't get me wrong, it's not that I think there *shouldn't* be a thorough investigation – I do. There can be no doubt that understanding what has happened, and how, so that we can learn lessons for the future, is of vital importance. However, I think it's fair to say that in some quarters there has also been a degree of searching for someone to point the finger at simply in order to take the pressure off themselves.

I think we've all heard of unusual and even ridiculous cases of people being sued for alleged harm they have done to others. One of my favourites – or *least* favourites – is the case of Brandon Majewski.

On a rainy night in October of 2012, 17-year-old Brandon from Ontario was riding with two of his friends down to the local plaza to get some hot dogs. They were riding three abreast down the road when they were struck behind by an SUV driven by 46-year-old Sharlene Simon, the wife of a Regional Police officer. Brandon Majewski died; the two others were injured.

Now, you might be expecting me to say that Brandon's family decided to sue Sharlene Simon, and perhaps wondering what is so unreasonably about that. No, not at all. It was Sharlene Simon who decided to sue Brandon's estate for the emotional trauma she suffered in the accident – to the tune of \$1.35 million!

Yes, you read it right. Despite the fact that they boys were riding legally on the road, and that they were wearing reflective clothing; despite the fact that Simon admits that she was speeding (by how much, it is disputed - she says 10kmh, his family's lawyers say it was more like 20-30kmh), despite the fact that there is some evidence that she was texting at the time, while driving in the dark in the rain on a rough road ... Despite all that, Sharlene Simon feels that the family of the boy she killed should pay her compensation, due to his incompetence as a rider!

Now, the wheels of justice grind slowly. The accident happened in 2012. The lawsuit was launched in 2014. In 2017 the case was still before the courts – that was when her opposing lawyers claimed that the original police investigation had been bungled and that they had evidence of her excess speeding and texting. By later that year, the case seems to have disappeared, either because there was mediation and an out-of-court settlement, or because she dropped her case. So, we don't know how – or if – blame was ever apportioned.

Whatever the outcome, I just think that this case says something deeply concerning about humanity. We always look for someone else to blame, someone else to sue, someone else to punish. We are reluctant to say, "You know, it was an accident, nobody is to blame," let alone to put our hands up and say: "Yes, I did it! It's my fault! I'm guilty!"

Which is the point of Jesus' parable, isn't it?

The Pharisee is determined to insist on his own righteousness, his own goodness, his own innocence – and to point the finger at anyone and everyone else who is more guilty than he. The tax collector, on the other hand, simply puts up his hand and says: "I'm guilty!" And yet, Jesus says, it was the *tax collector* who went home justified before God.

"Justified" means declared to be righteous. How can a man who admits to being guilty be declared righteous? That's where grace comes in. The tax collector begged God to have mercy on him, and he received it. The Pharisee, on the other hand, didn't ask for mercy because he didn't think he needed it. And *he* went home unjustified (if that's a word!).

Before God, we are all guilty. But, by his grace, he took our sin and shame and guilt and paid the price for all of us on the cross. That tax collector's sin didn't go unpunished – Jesus took it on himself and it was nailed to the cross with him. The Pharisee could also have had his sins forgiven – but he didn't think he needed it, so he didn't ask and didn't receive (see Matthew 7:7-8).