

REFLECTION



Laura Cullen from Ireland reflects on the downfall of John Profumo in the early sixties and his subsequent search for redemption.

I recently read the story of John Profumo and was profoundly moved by it. It's the story of a man who knew the glories of success and the pain of regret. It is a story about the different types of strength we need to get through life, and of how a person can pick himself up from the ground and repent; but more fundamentally it is a story of how God always gives us second, third... chances in life.

The Profumo affair

John Profumo was a British politician who in his life achieved great success, both in the military world as a second lieutenant, and in the political world as a conservative MP. He studied in Oxford and became a barrister,



Cliveden House, the scene of the 'Profumo affair'.

Second chances

like his father, before entering parliament. A bright and brilliant man his star shone from a young age for all to see. One evening at a soiree, John, who was married at the time and was the acting secretary of state for war, met an eighteen year old model named Christine Keeler. They soon began an affair. Unknown to Profumo, Keeler was also having an affair with a Russian diplomat which raised concerns about national security when it was eventually uncovered. When news of the affair broke, he lied to parliament saying that although he knew of



Keeler there had never been sexual relations between the two. His lie was soon discovered. He left his job as an MP and was disgraced by the media. His reputation hung in tatters. It was known as the 'Profumo affair'.

Cleaning toilets in Toynbee Hall

Most people never heard a peep about John after that. Many probably assumed he had gone into hiding, living out the rest of his days in bitterness or regret. But that is not the whole truth. He expressed his sorrow in a truly humble and noble way. He began to volunteer in Toynbee Hall, a charity in London's East End. For many years John cleaned the toilets and mopped the floors there. He spoke to no-one about his past or brought any attention to himself. This was his quiet way of atoning. After many years, the charity asked John to take up the role as chief fund-

Photo: Wikimedia

raiser. Although reluctant at first, he was a tremendously talented man and knew his talents could be used for good. Soon he began to fundraise for the charity and very successfully raised a considerable amount of money.



Joanne Whalley as Christine Keeler in the film 'Scandal'.

It would have been the easiest thing in the world for John Profumo to have buried his head in the sand until all the drama died down and then planned his resurrection once again. He could also have felt sorry for himself and lived the rest of his life in comfortable wealth, thinking of the incident as 'unfortunate' and of himself as an 'unlucky victim'. Instead John got down on his hands and knees and served the poor. In that way he searched for forgiveness and underwent an inner purgation that no one else but he could understand. He was eventually recognised for all his good work and was appointed in 1975 as a Commander of the Order of the British Empire (CBE).

God is mercy

This story reminded me straight away of Jesus' interactions with St Peter. On the night of Christ's arrest by the lighted fire in the courtyard Peter denied that he knew Christ three times. After this incident Peter felt bitter sorrow for his actions, as any of us would. But Christ's love for Peter was so great and so boundless that he

gave him a second chance. On the night of the great fish catch as the disciples ran from the boat to sit and eat fish with Jesus, he offered Peter his opportunity. As they sat around the lighted fire Jesus asked Peter three times do you love me? And three times Peter said that he did. Just as he denied Christ three times, Jesus gave him the chance to tell him he loved him three times.

These examples speak volumes to us about who God is. We all mess up in life many times every day. Our hearts are full of anxieties and darkness and moments to love which we let pass us by. And yet no matter how far we wander from the right path, Jesus will always help us get to where we are meant to be. I know my own path is extremely bendy and I go off course wildly and regularly – but Christ is always waiting to give me another chance. Hopefully we will have the grace to see this chance as clearly as John Profumo did.

Another important lesson the John Profumo affair reveals for us is that it is OK to fail. Our world is forever buoying us up to be strong and impermeable. And yet when I meet someone who honestly shares with me his failures I find it beautiful. I am deeply moved by his openness with me, but more importantly, his openness with himself. Just like Peter, we are human and we make mistakes and fail and that is ok because we can always start again. We can get down on our knees and beg for forgiveness. And we can do it time after time. Could there possibly be a greater freedom than this?

Christine Keeler

It should also be noted that Christine Keeler was herself a broken woman, even by the age of eighteen. Her father abandoned her family when she was still young and she grew up in poverty with her mother and her mother's partner. Her first home was a makeshift house wedged between two railway carriages in Wraybury. At the age of fifteen she began working as a model, and was encouraged to work topless in a cabaret bar. She was a beautiful girl with a bruised heart.

One of the most refreshing experiences in life is to have an open and honest encounter with another person and to not feel judged at all by them. 'Truth is pure mercy...' 

'Therefore I must make myself see things from God's viewpoint, in the truth, and treat my neighbour accordingly... Charity is preserved by truth, and truth is pure mercy with which we ought to be clothed from head to foot...'

Chiara Lubich

