

# A grief observed

Anglican priest Mina Smallman's documentary, about the devastating loss she suffered when two of her daughters were murdered, makes for searing viewing. By **Madoc Cairns**

**I** COULD GIVE Job a run for his money, Mina Smallman jokes; though grief hangs on those words, not laughter. If there's humour in what she says, it's the humour you find in Job, night-black, acid, born from bone-deep pain. Because Smallman's seen a lot of that. Her two daughters – Nicole Smallman and Bibaa Henry – were both murdered on 7 June 2020.

A few weeks later it emerged that two Metropolitan Police officers guarding the place they were found distributed photos of their bodies to dozens of other officers. Already living with chronic disability, in the months that followed Mina Smallman felt she was falling apart. To tell you the truth, she says, I wanted to be with them. I wanted to go.

Three things saved her: Christopher, her husband; her Christian faith (she is a retired Anglican priest); and her passion for justice. She sees Nicole and Bibaa's deaths, and what followed, as tangled up with prejudice and hate: hatred of women, hatred of people of colour, hatred of those who live in the wrong area, come from the wrong background. She was there in court when her daughter's killer was convicted, and she was there when the two officers who took pictures were sent to jail. She went on television and radio across the country to sound alarm after alarm; on male violence, on racism, on the paucity of mental health services, on the corruption that festers in parts of the Met.

Now she's made a documentary. *Two Daughters* (BBC2, 29 May) tracks Mina and Christopher's journey from the first agonising days after Nicole and Bibaa went missing, through the horror of discovery, the shock of betrayal by the police force they relied upon to bring them justice, and the long, harrowing months of mourning. The unbearable pain of parents who have to bury their child; the pain of knowing their loved one died violently; the ache and torment of death that is not only untimely, but also unjust. Mina Smallman suffered all these things at once. And twice over.

**IT'S NOT** surprising the experience shattered her – and at her insistence, the documentary shows that shattering in close, sometimes uncomfortable detail. What's extraordinary, in simply human terms, is how that shattering wasn't the end. *Two Daughters* is honest, fine-grained, human.



Stacey Dooley, left, and Mina Smallman at Canterbury Cathedral

That owes a lot to Smallman, who brought less-discussed topics into her media appearances following the murders: issues like forgiveness and faith. She was the first black woman archdeacon in the history of the Church of England when appointed in 2013. In person and in the documentary, she talks about God eloquently, unprompted. The death of her children didn't destroy her faith, she tells the audience after the preview screening of *Two Daughters*, but it tested her. "I felt like Job," she says – but she's careful to explain Job's story to people who might be unfamiliar with it – "everything is taken away from him, but he keeps praising God." She didn't turn to faith; she's fluent in it, unselfconscious in explaining the role God plays in her life. I've never really had a problem with God's absence, she tells the audience. She's felt his presence. "I've seen his footsteps very clearly."

When someone suggested that she take part in a documentary about her experiences, she told them she had one condition. It had to be Stacey Dooley. A bit of a reach, the production company warned her – the campaigning journalist and presenter would likely be booked out. Dooley got back to the email within 15 minutes. She said yes almost

immediately. Christopher, Mina's husband, doesn't have her deep, grounding faith – something sensitively explored in *Two Daughters* – but even he knows, Smallman says with a smile, "there's no such thing as coincidence".

**BELIEF HELPS** us make sense where there isn't any; makes order out of chaos, brings life out of death. It can work in darker ways, too. Nicole and Bibaa's murderer, 19-year-old Danyal Hussein, killed out of a belief that if he provided sufficient female "sacrifices", a demon would enable him to win the lottery. "When I heard that," Smallman said, "I knew I was on my territory." When, during the trial, Hussein smiled at Smallman, hoping, she thinks, to intimidate her, she winked back. "I had to let him know," she said, "that he hadn't destroyed me." Hussein was found guilty in October 2021, and sentenced to 35 years.

Smallman says she's forgiven him. "When we hold hatred for someone, it is not only them that is being held captive," she says. "It's you." Hussein had been flagged by teachers as having been radicalised by the far right when he was still at school. Prevent, the counter-terror office he was reported to, took

CONTINUED ON PAGE 22

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 21

no action. "I've been let down a lot in my life," Smallman says. "I was let down by my school when I was a teacher. I was let down by the Church when I was a priest. I'm used to it." Individual tragedies, individual outrages, highlight far bigger injustices. It's systemic, she says. "It needs systemic change."

It's a phrase she uses a lot, especially about the Metropolitan Police. She has to. Photos of her daughters' bodies were shared with dozens of serving officers. Smallman's pain at losing her children was compounded by later revelations that, during the lacklustre police search for Bibaa and Nicole, one call operator referred to them as suspects. An inquiry apologised for official failings – but denied race played a role in those mistakes. Smallman doesn't believe it. Why would you call someone a suspect, she asks, when no one had reported a crime?

Her suspicions have been vindicated in the years since. The Met has staggered from scandal to scandal – racism, misogyny, corruption – in a crisis that shows few signs of letting up. Since *Two Daughters* was made, Cressida Dick, Met Police commissioner, has resigned after a string of scandals made her position untenable. Smallman doesn't take pleasure in having been proved right. The Met has clearly, she tells the preview audience, become "a haven for thugs". It's not a problem of individuals, she says – we had a gay woman in charge and it didn't change things – there are good officers along with the bad. It's systemic.

**RACISM ISN'T** the focus of *Two Daughters*. The documentary centres itself in the lives of the victims, their family and friends, itself a snapshot of the multiracial reality of modern London; Christopher is white, and his daughter, Nicole, was mixed-race (Bibaa, 20 years Nicole's senior, was from a previous relationship of Mina's). But you can sense the weight of racism everywhere in the documentary, pressing down invisibly on people already overburdened with pain and sorrow. You can sense it in person with Mina Smallman too, who stresses again and again that she wants to speak to individuals, doesn't want to stereotype and assume, whether it's about police officers, or white people, or men. That something so obvious needs saying and resaying is a condemnation in itself.

*Two Daughters* is not about recovery. It has moments of resolution – the two trials, a memorial service, a tree planting – but it resists easy catharsis. Nicole and Bibaa's absence is stitched through the documentary like invisible thread; a remembrance and a reminder. The love is real, but the loss is permanent; there's justice, but, in this life anyway, no resurrection. It's an honesty that can be uncomfortable, even difficult to watch. It also seems the only way to honour the power and the gravity of Mina Smallman's grief. She doesn't stop being shattered; she doesn't stop. Looking at how much we still need to change the world we live in – that her daughters died in – neither should we.