

SERMON FOR 2nd SUNDAY BEFORE LENT | 24.02.2019

Genesis 2: 15-end; Ephesians 5: 25 – 6:4; St Luke 9: 46-48

Our pattern at St James', whether it is obvious to you or not (☺), is to give a different emphasis to the liturgy on each of the four Sundays of the month. The first Sunday tends to reflect on the building up the Church community in a fun way - like next Sunday's Mardi Gras. The second is more traditional with a crafted sermon. The third tries to explore one of the central bits of teaching that sometimes gets overlooked – and the fourth takes us into the more difficult ethical challenges of being a Christian today. It doesn't always work that neatly but that is the aim!

This 4th Sunday theme has literally forced its way into the schedule. Let me give you some headlines:

While the Vatican bishops are meeting for a major conference on child abuse, a 51 year old French sociologist, Frederic Martel, has published a book which claims that between 50-80% of the Vatican bureaucrats are gay.

The Rhythm and Blues star, R Kelly, has been charged with 10 counts of aggravated criminal sexual abuse, at least nine of which involve minors. A documentary series called 'Surviving R Kelly' contained decades of allegations of abuse from many women, including the singer's ex-wife.

In the Isle of Bute, a 16year old boy, Aaron Campbell, has been convicted of the torture, rape and murder of 6year old Alesha MacPhail in July 2018. He will be sentenced in March.

And in case we think this is only going on 'somewhere else', this week's Church Times has a report about someone who used to hang around St James' ten years ago: At Lewes Crown Court a freelance organist, Andrew Wilson, was ordered to serve 12 years in prison for 19 offences against young boys.

It is as if the world is obsessed with abusive sexual relationships. It is as if the Church has only just woken up to the fact that it has protected (or ignored) evidence against what many of its own people were up to. To our shame both the Catholic Church and the Church of England, in recent major investigations, have been deemed unfit to handle their own safeguarding issues without proper supervision by outside, secular, authorities.

And we all know why: well at least I do.

I guess have waited for perhaps 55 years to include this in a sermon. Back in March 1963, I was admitted to a small choir school in central London made up of just 16 boys. When I went there the headmaster was married. His successor wasn't. And using terms that weren't known to anyone at the time except a very small number of experts, we would describe him today as a predatory pedophile. He developed a series of friendships with those boys he counted his favourites and in that tiny series of buildings it was impossible not to know exactly what was going on when boys would 'disappear' into his flat for fifteen minutes at a time, or be found wandering off out of bed, late at night.

It took nearly four years before anything was done; then he 'vanished' for nearly twelve months before he turned up again – unbelievably - as a Diocesan Director of Education! As in countless stories the world over, he had simply been 'moved on'. No prosecution, no accountability – but the school closed two years later, unable to cope with the consequences.

The defence for the way the churches have acted has become well known. As in the tale of the former bishop of Gloucester, Peter Ball, people like Archbishop George Carey said that 'he simply couldn't possibly believe the allegations made against this humble and saintly man.' In other words – and this is such a familiar part of this shocking business – those who were abused were simply not believed. It was their word against that of a member of the clergy.

There is a sense in which this 'refusal to believe' the testimony of the young and the marginalised is almost as bad as the abuse itself. Listen to the words of Jesus in today's short Gospel: *whoever welcomes this child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me. For the least among you is the greatest...*

But I wonder, have we ever believed that? Have we ever seriously rowed against the ways of the world which sets celebrities, intellectuals and the powerful in the front row and the rest (the least) somewhere behind, out of sight and out of mind?

But there is yet more to be gained from our readings today. The passage in Genesis is really telling. Having created Adam, and having enjoyed the first flush of excitement as the animals were named and the natural world began to take shape, we can hear Adam getting more and more fed up. The commentary is a bit bald but we can easily imagine what has been going on between Adam and God: *But for the man there was not found a helper as his partner.* Adam was lonely and he was frustrated.

Loneliness is one of life's greatest burdens. We all suffer from it at various times and we have to make a conscious effort to develop relationships that will hold us up when life gets to be too much. The best of those relationships and partnerships are with people who love us and who stick by us, but who are also able to tell us when we have gone wrong.

The trouble is that those who are lonely are often also not very good at self-control or being told what to do. Out of genuine loneliness seems to come a desperate controlling streak – and a failure to value the person they are with - for themselves. That awful word 'grooming' is just another word for manipulation. Unlike Adam who recognizes Eve as his true partner, *bone of my bones and flesh from my flesh*, these predators just target the vulnerable for all that they can get out of them. When it suits them these people are often incredibly charming and – as the archbishop said - the last people who you would imagine to be abusing those who look up to them for comfort and affirmation.

In today's second reading we get a chunk of St Paul's purple prose. It is all a bit convoluted but in brief he tries to fuse together the idea that love of another is about dignity and equality – *no one hates his own body but nourishes it and cares for it.*

But that demands a level of maturity which is not the normal hallmark of those who abuse the vulnerable and the young.

That discretion and maturity has to be part of our safeguarding here. One of the many exciting things about St James' is the growth of our children's work – shown by the increasing numbers attending St James' on a regular basis. But with that comes an enhanced need for vigilance.

I have already told you about Andrew Wilson who, without my having any evidence, I suspected to be less than safe to have around children – exciting though his offers were to do some children’s choir work here. He knew what I was looking for and he homed in on that. Fortunately we didn’t take him up on his offer.

So it is vital that we continue to encourage our Safeguarding Officer, Isabelle Sharples and our Children’s Champion, Sinead Burniston. With the support of every parent, and every member of the congregation we have to keep an eye open to make sure that our children are comfortable and happy ‘being children’ here.

Which takes me, strangely, to the last line from the first reading: *And the man and his wife were both naked, and they were not ashamed.* Why has that been left in the account?

Because, unlike the Victorians who even covered up table legs in case people got over-excited, we have to reclaim human sexuality as natural - and pure. Sadly exploitation of the human form has made it a taboo subject of shame and innuendo, all a bit naughty. For our children ‘to be children’ is to claim back all creation into God’s loving care. Just because a few exploit and abuse the bodies of other people doesn’t mean that ‘that is all that can be said on the matter’. Part of our maturity and our sheer common sense is to extract from this last line in Genesis 2 our belief that we have every right to delight in physical beauty, to claim the right of everyone to explore their own place in the world - even if that means learning from emerging research issues about transgender and intersex states designed to help people to function holistically.

Among the many tragedies that has come from the abuse of scores of men and women, boys and girls, has been the impossibility, in public discourse, to give proper attention to the breath, length and height of human sexuality which, until recently, have been confined to top shelves, the stuff of conversations behind closed doors. Fortunately, as General Synod proved this week, those doors can’t be slammed shut any longer. God grant that we at St James’ are all prepared to create the right environment so that, as the front of the pew sheet says, and in all our diversity: *every child may grow up feeling safe and loved.*