# SERMON FOR 2 SUNDAY BEFORE LENT | 20.02.22

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

# What is it that we all love about children? Andrew Bunbury, treasurer of Cantallini, is the proudest of grandfathers and on Thursday night he had yet another story to tell. His eight year grandchild was being shown a bottle of 10 year old whisky. Spotting the label he said with relish *O, so I can have that in two years time, can I?!*

# It just that kind of naivety and innocent openness which we all find such a joy. It is the trust in the child who says with conviction, *but you can fix it can’t you?* when something gets broken or some tragedy occurs; the child who wants you to play with them in their imaginary, make-believe world. And there is a bit of that world that, looking at a child curled up asleep somewhere secure, we would love to return to. *Whoever welcomes this child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcome me welcome the one who sent me; for the least among all of you is the greatest.* ‘Every child deserves to grow up feeling safe and loved’ says the graphic on the front of today’s pew sheet.

# The fact that we have had to launch an Independent Investigation into Child Sexual Abuse (IICSA) now finally making a whole host of recommendations, tells us what we already know: that these cases are not limited to the activities of Jimmy Saville and people like him, but are evidence that child sex abuse is deeply ingrained in all the churches; all of us have read reports of cases stretching back for more than sixty years: teachers, churchwardens, organists, priests, bishops and cardinals – it is now all out in the open – though the scramble to put safeguarding rules into place may be a good example of shutting the gate after the horse has bolted.

# And the startling thing is not just the scale of the abuse – Canon Gordon Rideout for example was charged with 36 separate offences against 16 different children – but the time it has taken for the true facts to emerge.

# How could that be, we wonder? Professor Linda Woodhead sums it up like this: *Listening to the evidence of abuse and cover up in the Chichester Diocese has been a miserable experience. The stories recounted by survivors were harrowing, the explanations offered by senior clergy were shocking – and the mix of the two was a lesson in unbelievable inhumanity…*

# Interestingly her reflections begin by exploring Christian forgiveness. She contrasts two different views which, she says, lead to the same place. There is the Calvinist view that we are all sinners, but faith leads to forgiveness; and the Catholic view that Confession wipes away every fault, every time.

# Both work from the theory that sin is simply against God. It is breaking my relationship with him and has nothing to do with anyone else. And from that it follows that because God is all loving, he will pardon all those who confess.

# But that, according to Marjorie Suchoki, has never been true within the Christian tradition. She puts her finger on the matter when she says that sin is not just offending some remote God in the sky: sin is rebellion against God ‘as we behave in our daily lives’. Forgiveness cannot bypass the victims. As the wise bishop of Buckingham, Alan Wilson, has said, *I am accountable to God through you - not without you.*

# Which makes us ask the question: so what kind of God do we believe in: a God who stands outside our world and knows exactly what will happen, or a God who is deeply involved in the minutiae of life and who is affected by what happens – including suffering with those who are being abused? If it is the second then there can be no other conclusion: when we harm a child we harm God as well. Move on eight chapters in St Luke’s Gospel and Jesus returns to the subject with this: *Things that cause people to sin are bound to come. But I tell you, it would be better to be thrown into the sea with a millstone around his neck than for him to cause one of these little ones to sin…*

# As everyone now acknowledges, the root cause behind much of the abuse of children lies in the dreadful exercise of power by adults over the young. It was true of the barrister John Smyth QC who beat scores of boys in Church sponsored youth camps; it was true of the former bishop of Gloucester, Peter Ball, in his warped encouragement of young men who, thinking they had a vocation to priesthood, were inveigled to spend time in his house. Linda Woodhead says that much of this stems from the ridiculous vision of the Church as an oasis of truth and goodness in a sea of secular ungodliness. In this view, the clergy were always thought to be above reproach. To the investigating tribunal Bishop Nicholas Reade stated quite plainly: *I took priests at their word.*

# But sadly not, apparently, the testimony of victims…

# Our set Readings for today take us to the heart of the matter. St Paul in the 2nd Reading outlines life within a model family, full of love and mutual respect. Genesis is rather more complex - and perhaps even more helpful.

# Because we read how God recognises that the essence of Adam’s ills was that he was lonely. So lonely in fact that naming the animals – however much fun that might have been to start with – was never quite enough.

# He needed a partner, a companion, an alter ego, a soul mate. He needed someone else to relate to, someone who with whom to interact. The current debate about celibacy for priests in the Church is nothing new: to what degree should those in authority impose a life of solitude on someone else? Is it healthy and are there risks? I think society has largely come to the conclusion that it isn’t healthy and that the risks are profound. Too often that need for love and mutual support, that natural desire for relief from isolation and loneliness, has become diverted (and perverted) into a control mechanism over others who are weaker and more vulnerable.

# But let’s broaden this out for a moment. Because not all abuse of adults against children – in the Church or elsewhere – is overtly sexual. I have already talked of the book I read some weeks ago by Alan Davies, of the way he was treated by his single parent father, ridiculed and tormented in all kinds of ways that have profoundly affected Alan ever since. Denying him simple pleasures, telling him that he was fat and favouring his other children were all examples of this ill treatment – and we are all familiar with such behaviour (in one form or another) among those we know.

# So before we too readily consign the area of safeguarding to the possibility that one of us would physically abuse a child in our community, we also have to ask: how do we relate to one another – and are there signs of bullying and manipulation in the ways we order our Church life? Are we genuinely open to all, respectful of all shades of opinion, old for young and young for old; and are we really good at spotting signs of people being undermined because of who they are or how they live?

# The Church of England is rightly putting a lot of effort into making sure our children are safe with more and more safeguarding training. But tinkering with procedures is still not enough. It may be that we need to take a much more rigorous look at our ‘Church culture’ where so much is hidden behind closed doors and a ‘we know best’ attitude at the top still pervades the way we work. Deference to those with big hats is still rampant and the Church is still a very secret society - and very top heavy.

# Which is why the last line of today’s Genesis reading is so important. *And the man and his wife were both naked and were not ashamed.* Why is that so significant? Well, it has nothing to do with sexuality that’s for sure! What the writer of Genesis wants to tell us is that Adam and Eve stood before one another as equals, as friends and companions, transparent, with nothing to hide and no intent to dominate the other. They were to be inter-dependant and mutually supportive. Anything less than that, in any context, is abusive.