

23rd S. in OT, Yr B.

9-9-2018.

Child Protection Sunday.

Following on the disturbing revelations examined in the Royal Commission into the Institutional sexual abuse of Children, it is doubly important that we put some effort into today's observance of Child Protection Sunday.

In that regard, it is important to note that our Parish has worked for many years to implement a sound Child Safety policy, which requires the priests, the staff and anyone connected with working or meeting in the Parish facilities to have the appropriate Working with Children clearance, and are committed to observe that policy.

Lately, together with the Archdiocese, the Parish has been involved in reviewing and updating that policy, so there is consistency across the Archdiocese in what is expected, and following confirmation by the Parish Pastoral Council at their meeting on Wednesday, it will be released and made available next Sunday.

Briefly, that policy seeks to ensure that in all circumstances the dignity of children is respected, that their safety and wellbeing is assured, and that all those who have responsibility towards them are diligent in their care towards those children, including reporting to the proper authorities any abuse which they may become aware of. With 10 pages of detail that is a substantial document.

So what about Child Protection Sunday?

If we want to protect our house from robbers, we might think of fitting our doors with strong locks, barring vulnerable windows and installing an alarm system that will ring at the local police station. That could deter robbers from breaking in.

Protecting people, however, demands more than that. Particularly in the case of children. To protect them we need to make a broad space in which children are free to run and play as they please, in which they can grow and explore the world, and in which they know that they will be listened to and are safe. In that space they will have the company of mature adults whose eyes and ears are open to notice potential dangers and to deal with them. Their care means that children can grow carefree.

Child Protection Sunday recalls to us our task of ensuring that children in our churches and schools can grow, talk and play safely. The day carries

great weight because we know that in the Catholic Church too many people entrusted with the care of children have exploited and abused them. Those protecting the house became bandits. Child Protection Sunday is a time for locks and alarms: for ensuring that proper protocols and safeguards are observed. More deeply it is a time for asking how better we can make the Church a welcoming space in which children can flourish.

The readings for today's Mass invite us to reflect on this task.

The first reading, from Isaiah, addresses people whose faith is tested in hard times. Having been exiled from Israel, the land that God had promised them, they were dispirited and isolated. Their experience resonates with many Catholics today for whom the crimes of clerical sexual abuse of children and the devastating effects on the lives of its victims weigh heavily and sap their confidence and joy in living their faith. The burden is borne particularly by those who themselves have survived abuse or know and love those affected by it.

Isaiah tells the people not to be afraid, because God is coming to save them. He then describes in vivid images what it means to be made whole – it is like the blind suddenly seeing, the deaf hearing, the lame walking freely. It is like a parched and waterless desert where jackals prey, being transformed into a green and fertile land where rivers and streams flow. The images invite us first to imagine a church in which predators prowl, hope dies, children are unsafe and victims of abuse go unheard and unattended to. And then to imagine it as a place where children can safely grow and thrive, and people whose lives have been maimed can be welcomed, heard and come to walk freely.

In the second reading St James describes a world in which rich people exploit poor people because they are powerful enough to do so. He imagines a meal where the rich sit in the best places and leave the poor to stand or sit on the floor. He reminds his readers that the poor are rich in faith and belong to God's kingdom. His image reminds us of the sense of power and entitlement that people who abuse children often display, often associated with their priesthood or religious calling. It also reminds us of those who put the reputation and privileged place of the Church ahead of the safety of the vulnerable. That contrasts with the simple trust and faith of children in whom God's love for each human being stands out most clearly.

In Mark's story Jesus heals a man who is deaf and has a speech impediment. Jesus usually cures with a simple word, sometimes accompanied by laying on hands. But he cures this man by putting his fingers into his ears and mouth. Jesus' touch brings healing and confidence to the man in the story. The story reminds us of the blessing and importance of physical expressions of love between parents and children in their growth towards becoming affectionate and healthy adults. Through gestures such as hugs they show their love and recognise that they themselves are deeply loved.

Jesus' encounter with this man also brings home to us the horror of the sexual abuse of children, where the innocent openness of children is exploited by gestures that are caricatures of affection. They destroy trust and mine the path to happy adulthood. To protect children we must ensure that they are treated with the respect and love that Jesus has modelled for us.

In Mark's story, too, the man is brought out a world of silence into one where he can hear and speak clearly, and so be able to participate fully in the life of the community. The Catholic community was also trapped in silence when responding to the sexual abuse of children. Children were not listened to, those who heard did not believe, or failed to report it, priests and Bishops tried to preserve public silence about it. This was a silent world in which children suffered. The Church to which Jesus calls us is one where people speak freely, children play safely, and life is lived transparently.

It is our hope that our observance of our Child safety policy will help to achieve this.

(Main part of homily provided by Fr. Andrew Hamilton SJ.)