

# How do we share hospitality - in the face of sexual abuse?

Pitt Street Uniting Church, Sunday 17 October, 2021

A Reflection by Rev Dr Josephine Inkpin

Pentecost 21

Psalm 121; Hebrews 5: 1-10; Mark 10: 35-45

This worship service can be viewed on You Tube at <https://pittstreetuniting.org.au/spirit/reflections/>

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Many years ago, before entering ordained ministry, I worked for the probation service in England. I was an assistant house manager for a hostel for what were called 'hard to place' ex-offenders. 'Hard to place' – whom do you think that included?

Well, it referred both to those who had committed the most serious of crimes and to those who were liable to cause physical and reputational damage, including those who had committed arson or who might be seen by the wider community as scandalous. We had men who had committed so-called 'minor' offences – some of whom, to be honest, could sometimes be the most awkward residents of all. We also, however, sometimes had men who were on 'life license' for taking the lives of others. Certainly, we always had at least one man, or several, who had committed sexual offences. Perhaps that group of people were also always of the greatest underlying concern, at least in terms of risking public outcry and our own limits of hospitality. For appropriate relationships with those who have committed sexual offences is rightly vital. What then does that mean, today, for churches?

Today, as part of our national Uniting Church's recognition, we mark the third anniversary of the National Apology to Victims and Survivors of Institutional Child Sexual Abuse (made by Prime Minister Scott Morrison on 22 October 2018).<sup>1</sup> We do so in a spirit of deep penitence for the ways in which members of our own Church, and others, have been part of that abuse, and for how collusion has been systemically embodied in the life of Churches. We commit ourselves to doing all we can to address the horrendous pain which has resulted and to nurture church communities which have the highest standards of safety, care and nurture. Challenging though this is, to do so requires us to continue, actively, to listen and reflect more deeply, and to work towards more life-giving relationships and policies, for all.

For all? Is that right? Let me say that again, because it can too easily trip off the tongue. Is our hospitality for everyone? How do *we* feel, for example, about being places for hard-to-place people of all kinds of backgrounds? And, if our welcome is for all, on what terms is this hospitality to be offered? What do you feel? What do you think?

The Uniting Church in Australia is clear that the Gospel, the love of God, and its hospitality, is for everyone. This includes both those who have suffered from sexual abuse - and those who have inflicted it. However, the Uniting Church is also clear that we need to work through the challenges this causes. We also need to be sensitive to the complexity of

issues, remembering, for example, that sexual abuse covers a huge variety of acts and contexts.

Therefore, both at national and Synod levels, Safe Church units exist to enable effective policies which provide safety and potential flourishing for all. For details, please do check out the National Safe Church Unit pages at [safechurch.uca.org.au](http://safechurch.uca.org.au), and our Synod Unit and resources on the NSW/ACT Synod website.

Core to this is an understanding of hospitality which gives priority to those who have suffered from sexual abuse and their need for safety and flourishing. This involves developing awareness, setting boundaries, and, not least, giving particular attention to those who have inflicted sexual abuse. Therefore – and let me say this very clearly – no known perpetrator of child sexual abuse is allowed to be part of any Uniting church without deep prior attention, risk assessment, and a specific, signed, agreement on boundaries and supervision.

What, we may ask, more broadly, does it mean to be a church which exercises God's hospitality? Now that the Season of Creation has ended, this is the overall theme of our Pitt Street worship until Advent. For we began last week by reflecting on mental health, and in the next few weeks we will reflect on other aspects of hospitality. For we can too simply repeat our Pitt Street commitment to be a church community in which, and I quote, '*all are welcome... wherever you have come from and wherever you are going to.*' That sounds wonderful, doesn't it? Many of us are part of the Pitt Street community because of that intentional spirit.

However, let us think about it a bit more - what does that actually mean, in practice? Particularly today, in relation to sexual abuse, what does it mean to affirm a '*welcome to all*'? How do we handle our different experiences and attitudes? We require careful discernment - don't we? - In both churches and wider society. For example, the hostel I worked in long ago was dedicated to being open to offenders of all kinds, but not on any conditions. Nor was it at all automatic that all, or any, sex offender could live in the hostel in which I worked. The particular needs and attitudes of each such person had to be considered, the impact they might have on other residents, and the overall balance of the community in the hostel. So too in churches. We have to weigh up the respective needs of everyone.

Research is very clear that rejecting sex offenders is detrimental both to them and the wider community. Isolating and/or stigmatising sex offenders does not reduce their potential threat. It actually increases it. What are needed are good, bounded, relationships, ideally which seek growth. Yet, the needs of the sex offender can never come before those of others. We must prioritise the care of children, the vulnerable, and, not least, those who have been traumatised in the past. So what kind of mutual understandings, and in churches, formal agreements, do we then need?

That is not an academic question, is it?! For even when we are not ourselves survivors, or perpetrators, of sexual abuse – as some of us are - then I think it is true to say that we all know someone who is a survivor, or who has perpetrated abuse. These matters are complex, as well as of deep importance, hurt and emotion.

Two of my long-time friends, for example, could not attend my induction as Minister at Pitt Street. For they simply cannot be in the same room. One was abused for many years by a Catholic priest and has been an active advocate for justice for herself and others. Rightly, in my view, she articulates the need for 'zero tolerance' of abuse. This, for her, means no space for convicted sex offenders in many quarters, including meeting up with the second friend of mine, who has served time in prison for his complicity in such crimes.

I am full of admiration for those who have fought so hard for Safe Church practices, and I believe the Uniting Church has good policies which now enable us to offer safety. However, the task must continue. We have to be honest about our feelings and name the challenges. One of these is ownership of this work by us all. For Churches must not leave these matters to ordained Ministers and congregational lay officers alone. Confidentiality is indeed vital and we certainly have to handle some details carefully - for very good pastoral, as well as legal, reasons.

Yet experience has shown that unless the whole Church community is involved in working through these issues, then we do not really move forward in the real goals of healing for us all, not least for those who have been most deeply harmed. Recent research, notably in the USA, confirms this.<sup>ii</sup> In particular, it emphasises how congregations need to think through carefully what they mean by '*all are welcome*', and what limits, if any, might be placed upon this. Ideally, rather than just ensuring protections, we also need to develop more restorative practices that can provide healing. For this takes us to the heart of the Gospel. Our Church Council also invites us all into consideration of these matters, and how we can play our part. For the moment, let me offer a few theological pointers from our two scripture readings today.

Firstly, today's Gospel reading (Mark 10.35-45) reminds us of what Jesus said about power, and the way he lived. For issues of power are at the heart of sexual abuse, are they not? Communities which nurture 'power-with', rather than 'power-over', are also not immune to sexual abuse, but they are typically healthier. That is the kind of love which the Gospel proclaims, involving mutuality and accountability. When, in today's Gospel reading, James and John therefore ask to share the power of Jesus, Jesus readily agrees - but immediately points out that that this involves sharing power with others and being willing to suffer for the sake of true love. As sexual abuse shockingly shows, in that case hideously, love is betrayed when power is used over others. It is risky to seek God's type of love to create true community. It involves a willingness to name the truth, seek justice for those who have been harmed, practice compassion, and together nurture relationships which honour the particular needs of everyone. This however is the pathway to God's community.

Secondly, our reading today from the Letter to the Hebrews (5.1-10) calls us to take the realities of sin and sacrifice profoundly seriously. Now, it has to be said that some of the language in that text can seem a little alien. It is, after all, speaking into the context of the writer's own day, and particular conceptions of priesthood which were highly debated at the time. The office of the high priesthood had become highly politicised and hopes for a high priest who would embody and help purify Judean religion were part of other hopes for a Messiah to bring deliverance to the people.<sup>iii</sup>

The otherwise somewhat obscure figure of Melchizedek is thus mentioned, as people of faith searched the scriptures to find a non-Levite ancestry for a high priest, mentioned in some of the psalms, who would be the fulfilment of scripture. So this text may have ancient linkages, some distant to us. The heart of it however is the declaration that Christ has fulfilled the ancient priesthood and its sacrificial purpose. In, and through, Christ, Hebrews assures us, we have already been set free from sin. In Christ, any necessary sacrifice is complete. Christ has already opened the gateway of salvation to us. What we need to do is receive the grace of God that Christ offers to us.

Now, I know that some people struggle with conceptions of sin today. Due to unhealthy teaching, it has been tied to punitive ideas of God, and sometimes related only to specific behaviours, including to some sexual relationships which are actually full of love. The word 'sin', which in New Testament Greek essentially means 'missing the mark', has also been given much greater intensity than it sometimes deserves. Yet, sin, I would affirm, is still both a crucial concept in Christian Faith, and very real – and not least when we come to issues of child sexual abuse. This is part of the healing power of today's passage from the Letter to the Hebrews.

Some things, frankly, are just so heinous that they defy comfortable language and any easy pathways forward. Child sexual abuse is one of these. With all the best human efforts in the world, and we must have them – trauma and long-term counselling and support, apologies and liturgies, determined policies of safety and protection, and restorative practices of all kinds – whatever we do, some things are beyond even complex understanding and commitments. These, to my mind, are the things into which the ancient traditions of priesthood and sacrifice still speak. For, rightly, they speak of sin – and, indeed, sin not just in terms of 'missing the mark', but of utterly rupturing goodness and human repair; the destruction of innocence and trust, the corruption of intimacy and hope. In the midst of this, for the Judaeo-Christian tradition, we are forced back onto the love and grace of God. When all human holiness is gone, only divine holiness remains. When human forgiveness is not possible, only divine forgiveness is possible.

Let me conclude on that note. For today's reading from Hebrews is an affirmation of the Christian grounds of hope for all, and therefore the possibilities of hospitality to all. It may thereby help us to avoid forms of cheap grace. For it is too easy to say that God loves us all, and that therefore, not only does God offer forgiveness to everyone, but that we too must share that gift of forgiveness by simply forgiving everyone and sharing with them. That is a distortion of the Gospel. For part of the strength of the Christian sin-sacrifice-salvation trajectory, is that we must watch out for cheap grace. For what about the depth of the harm done and the hurt felt? What about those who do not feel comfortable even to be in a space, like a church, where welcome is extended to all? What kind of safe space is a church to them then? How does this sit with our commitment to people harmed and to the issues of abuse of all kinds which are rightly surfacing today, and should not be silenced?

Our Gospel hope in such contexts must encompass this too. It must offer the true costly grace of God, grounded, as this is, on the risky, mutual, sacrificial love of which both our scriptural texts speak today. The Church in all its denominations has cruelly betrayed children and others by its handling of sexual abuse. This is not easily overcome. We need everyone's deeper prayer and mutual commitment. And we assuredly need the grace and holiness of God.

In the name of Jesus Christ, still crucified in all who suffer, yet who bears assurance of hope in their wounds of healing love, Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> <https://www.childabuseroyalcommissionresponse.gov.au/national-apology/html>

<sup>ii</sup> See for example the work and recommendations of Ministry Safe – helpful introductory guidance here : <https://churchexecutive.com/archives/stop-sexual-abuse-8> and further at <https://ministrysafe.com>

<sup>iii</sup> See further for instance <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/ordinary-29-2/commentary-on-hebrews-51-10>