

Towards A Safe and Courageous Church

Pitt Street Uniting Church, Sunday 16 October 2022

A Reflection by Elizabeth Lee

Pentecost 19C

Contemporary Reading: from the National Apology to Victims and Survivors of Institutional Child Sexual Abuse 22 October 2018; Luke 18: 1-8

The video of this reflection can be viewed on You Tube at <https://pittstreetuniting.org.au/spirit/reflections/> The version below is not a transcript, but the script from which the reflector spoke, so there may be some changes of wording.

A few months ago, we at Pitt St incorporated into our liturgy Miriam Rose Ungunmer Bauman speaking of Dadirri says "*To know me is to breathe with me. To breathe with me is to listen deeply. To listen deeply is to connect*". Let us take a moment to breathe together. To listen deeply and to connect.

What I have to say may be challenging. The topic is challenging. For some, triggering. So let us take a moment to consider what we might do to care for ourselves and others when disturbed by what we hear, or by what is evoked within us. We will offer a listening space in the Peace Chapel following the service this morning. Your pastoral friends are available to offer you support in this and other contexts. Maybe take a few minutes to walk in nature before returning home today. Other avenues of support are listed in the worship booklet.

This morning may be challenging as the issues are controversial and far from simplistic. The complexity of the issues is rarely explored. Debates become polarised, views entrenched. Or the topic is avoided altogether. Despite these challenges, we need to bring these issues into the open and into conversation with our theology and pastoral practice; otherwise, we collude with the culture of silence.

Sexual abuse is a crime. The appropriate people to deal with a crime are the police. Abuse is also an abuse of relational power. For me, abuse of relational power is about as good a definition of sin as I can come up with. I will return to this later.

But first I turn to the Gospel reading.ⁱ Biblical scholars suggest that the parable told by Jesus is then retold by the writer of Luke's Gospel many decades later. If we look at verses one and six to eight, the parable seems to be about prayer. If we persist in prayer we will be rescued from what besets us. This may be what the author of the Gospel was intending to say to their audience in their time. It seems that these verses were added to the story told by Jesus. So let us just focus on the parable that Jesus is likely to have spoken - verses 2-5.

A woman's voice breaks the culture of silence. As a widow, she is economically and socially vulnerable and a victim of injustice. She is probably trying to claim maintenance from her dead husband's estate or the inheritance he would have pledged to her in the event of his death. The sum involved was large enough to attract adversaries. William Herzog in *Parables as Subversive Speech* suggests that there was probably collusion between her adversary and the judge.

Jesus in telling this story is highlighting the gap between the spirit of the Jewish legal system as laid out in the Torah, and how it actually played out. However, the widow circumvents the system, publicly challenging the judge, who we have been told “*feared no one – not even God.*” It seems like this unnamed woman feared no one either. The judge, begrudgingly gives in, not because justice will be served but to bring ease to his life.

What does this parable together with the National Apology to Victims and Survivors of Institutional Child Sexual Abuse offered by the then Prime Minister, the Hon Scott Morrison have to offer us now? What does the parable offer five years on from the Royal Commission? What does it offer us here at Pitt St?

I offer three insights

Firstly - Apology

Four years ago, the then Prime Minister offered a detailed and well-considered apology on behalf of the Australian Government and all Australians. The Uniting Church in Australia has also issued its own apology. ⁱⁱ

For an apology to be genuine it requires that it is offered freely and sincerely by the one who has caused the harm. Those harmed are under no obligation to receive the apology. Now let's be clear: “*If my action has caused offence, then I apologise.*” That is not an apology!

An apology can take a quite simple form:

*I am sorry for...,
this was wrong because...,
In the future I will...,
and I will try and make things right by ...*

Acceptance of responsibility, expression of remorse, intention to change and commitment to make things right are all essential elements. If there is no acceptance of responsibility, no indication of an intention to change then the apology is meaningless. It is unfair and dishonest to offer insincere pseudo-apologies.

Secondly - Justice

Issuing an apology is not enough, it is but one step. This is where justice comes in. We need to define what we mean by justice. Unfortunately, justice is generally equated with retribution. Yet as Gandhi is reported to have said, “*an eye for an eye just makes the whole world blind.*” The focus of retributive justice is on the one who has caused harm and largely renders the one harmed voiceless. A restorative approach involves a paradigm shift. Here the attention is on the one harmed, what their needs are - and whose obligation it is to meet those needs. It is about setting relations right. Or at least, as right as possible. It also requires that steps are taken to ensure it does not happen again.

Committed to taking steps to ensure it does not happen again, the Uniting Church has developed a range of Safe Church Policies, procedures and resources. These focus on minimising the risk of harm to children and vulnerable people, ensuring that concerns are reported appropriately, and remaining compliant with legislative requirements.

The Church's approach also includes policies and procedures for Persons of Concern. These arrangements place boundaries around the involvement of those who are known to have offended so they can participate in worship.

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In this way, the Church aims to balance the need to protect children while upholding the right of individuals to worship with a congregation. To minimise the risk of abuse, misconduct and abuse of power while ensuring that all people are respected and valued.

Working with Children Checks are now required by most organisations for employees and volunteers who work with children and vulnerable people. Such safeguarding measures are now required for those who volunteer within the Uniting Church, not only for those working with children but also anyone who could be perceived to be in a position of leadership and hence trustworthy.

Pitt St Church Council considers that nearly every volunteer could be perceived as a person of trust. So, in future Working With Children Checks will be required to volunteer at Pitt St. I will speak at our AGM later this morning about what this will entail practically.

However, working with children checks alone will not ensure the safety of children and vulnerable people. We need to go beyond compliance and checks and create a culture of safety. We need to be trauma-sensitive and use a restorative approach in what we do at Pitt St. This brings me to my third point this morning.

Trauma-sensitive choices

Yes our first priority must be the protection of children and vulnerable people so further harm is not inflicted on them. But what of those in our community who have been harmed? The prevalence of sexual abuse in and beyond Australia is disturbing. Within any faith community, we can anticipate that, like in the wider society, some 25% of women and 12% of men have been sexually abused as children, depending on the definitions used.ⁱⁱⁱ In addition, it is estimated that 17% of women and 4.3% of men have experienced at least one sexual assault since the age of 15.^{iv}

Consequently, it would be fair to assume that the majority of any congregation would either be or know a primary or secondary (parents, siblings, spouse, children) victim of abuse, with the ripples spreading in the community and across time. Yet rarely are the effects of childhood abuse acknowledged in faith communities. That is why Sundays like this are important, or we risk continuing to silence the voices of those harmed and colluding with perpetrators.

The congregation needs to commit to making Pitt St a safe and courageous place for all. We must embed a trauma-sensitive approach, prioritising the needs of those harmed through abuse, be it as a child or adult, in or outside of an institutional context. A trauma-sensitive approach requires establishing trust, witnessing truth, prioritising relationality and enabling flourishing.

Foundational to establishing trust is cultivating safe and courageous spaces. Not only for children and vulnerable people, but also for those who have been harmed and those who have caused harm. This requires transparency, collaborative decision making and accountability. Witnessing truth involves the full acceptance of the trauma stories, be they spoken or unspoken, speakable or unspeakable.

One of the theologians who is informing my research in this area is Associate Professor Shelly Rambo. Shelly invites us to attend to Holy Saturday.^v Holy Saturday is the day between crucifixion and resurrection. It is a day that is often glossed over in the liturgical life of churches. Yet Holy Saturday offers a unique opportunity to communally contemplate and ritually embody the experience of remaining in the place between death and life.

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This place between death and life is the lived experience of the traumatised. Holy Saturday offers communities the opportunity to witness the told and untold stories of all those harmed, those who have caused harm and those who have witnessed harm. Witness offered through testimony, contemporary stories, Sacred Texts, movement and art. This place of remaining provides an opportunity for individuals and communities to lament the atrocities we confront.

Serene Jones, President of Union Theological Seminary, is curious as she asks how would preachers preach differently if, when they look out at their congregation, instead of seeing a group of healthy, high-functioning people, they are able to see the scars and the wounds and understand that trauma really fractures people's capacity to think? ^{vi} I ask "*if we could see the scars and the wounds and understand that trauma fractures people's lives, how would we relate to one another, how would our liturgies, our community time, our policies, procedures, church layout be different?*"

How would our theology be different? Grace Jantzen asks how things might be different if, instead of a theology of salvation, we were to develop a theology of flourishing? ^{vii}

I believe that many of our responses to the Royal Commission are deficient. Yes, all volunteers will need to comply with the new requirements. But we need to go further and foster a trauma-sensitive, restorative culture at Pitt St and within the Uniting Church. We live in a traumatised world, affecting all aspects of our lives, including congregational life. It is my hope that through establishing trust, witnessing truth, prioritising relationality and enabling flourishing, suffering may be met with faith, hope, love and Divine grace

Returning to today's parable. Widowhood left the woman in today's parable desperate. The very system of Jewish law that should have offered her protection is being subverted by self-serving, powerful, corrupt elite. The widow calls it for what it is – the abuse of relational power, and in doing so breaks the mould of this unjust system. The Lukan parable spiritualises the story, but Jesus was characteristically challenging and subverting the systemic failings of the institutions. Just as the Royal Commission has done. We need to listen and respond.

Let us pause and hold silence as we breathe together. To listen deeply, to connect in the Spirit of Dadirri.

ⁱ As I interpret this parable, I am drawing primarily on the work of William Herzog's "Chapter 12 Justice at the Gate? The Parable of the Unjust Judge (Luke 18:1-8) in *Parables as Subversive Speech: Jesus as Pedagogue of the Oppressed*, Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster/John Knox Press. 1994

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

<https://uniting.church/anniversary-of-apology-to-survivors-of-institutional-child-sexual-abuse/>

ⁱⁱⁱ Child, Family, Community Australia. "The Prevalence of Child Abuse and Neglect." AIFS April 2017, accessed 16 May 2022 <https://aifs.gov.au/cfca/publications/prevalence-child-abuse-and-neglect>

^{iv} ABS 2017. "Personal Safety Survey, Australia, 2016" ABS cat. no. 4906.0. Canberra: ABS, accessed 16 May 2022, <https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/people/crime-and-justice/personal-safety-australia/latest-release>

^v Shelly Rambo, *Spirit and Trauma: A Theology of Remaining*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010.

^{vi} Serene Jones, *Trauma and Grace: Theology in a Ruptured World*, Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2019,

^{vii} Jantzen, Grace, "Flourishing," in *An A to Z of Feminist Theology*, ed. Lisa Isherwood and Dorothea McEwan, 70-72. Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1996.