

# National Apology to Victims and Survivors of Institutional Child Sexual Abuse

Pitt Street Uniting Church, Sunday 20 October 2024

A Reflection by Robert Fitzgerald AM <sup>i</sup>

Pentecost 22B

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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Well, good morning. And I must say it's a great privilege. In fact it's a great joy to be with you this morning. A big thank you to Reverend Josephine and my good friend Elizabeth Lee, and for each of you. But my thanks actually goes, not simply for inviting me to be here to reflect on the apology to the victim survivors of sexual abuse in our institutions.

But I thank you for you believing that this is important because it is. And the Royal Commission, which would have come as a great shock to many of you, as various institutions with which you had grown up as children and as adults as parents and now as grandparents, were revealed to be flawed in a very grave way.

Nevertheless there was something that is reflected in the very first reading. It says: *for the truth that comes out of suffering*. And if ever there was an Inquiry or Commission in which that statement is in fact true, it is the Royal Commission.

When we look back at the Royal Commission, which is now some years ago, and we reflect on the statement today we reflect on something that is really important not only for the institutions that were named and shamed but for Australia collectively. And it's a story both of suffering but of hope. Of fear and of a future which can be now different to us.

When the Prime Minister on the 22nd of October 2018, Prime Minister Morrison said: *as a nation we confront our failure to listen, to believe, and to provide Justice to the children we failed we say sorry*, he reflected in the simplest terms the essence of what that Royal Commission over 5 years had found. But to listen we have to listen to the voice of victim/survivors and I want to quote from a survivor that connected with the Royal Commission, Wendy Horder. She did a private session with the commission - and as part of her recovery she's written a couple of books of poems. One is called Desecration. To understand this you have to understand that as a young girl she was abused by a minister of religion, a Priest in the Catholic Church. She's written many poems and in just one verse says this:

*Who will listen to the children's pain?  
Who will bind their wounds?  
Who will nourish them again?  
Who will hold them in their arms?  
And save these children of the church?*

When we reflect on the Royal Commission, it's easy to talk about the numbers. But it's important to reflect on some. 8,000 people came forward in private sessions who had been sexually abused as children within institutions. Over 50 public hearings were held. Over four and a half thousand institutional settings were identified. They included the church in which I was a child. They included the school to which I sent my two sons. They included the parish in which I worship.

Over 60% of all abuse was identified as having taken place in faith-based institutions, 10% in non-faith-based non-profits and 30% in the government. So the very Church, the very churches, that we worship in were in fact the majority of where this abuse took place. And it isn't true because this was a witch hunt against the church; it isn't true that this was a make believe story, blown out of all proportions. None of that was true. The truth was that the 8,000 people who came forward to us spoke the truth of what had happened. In many senses it's also important to listen to what those who came forward in those private sessions sought. They sought three things:

- The first is they sought to be believed. And belief is a term that was very strong in the statement that was made in 2018.
- The second is they sought justice! Justice for themselves, but justice for the others around them who had suffered that abuse and continued to suffer that abuse today!
- And the third thing is that they hoped that their story, the stories that they told in private and some in public would actually make a difference, so that this abuse that took place to children in our revered institutions would never happen again.

They didn't come to be called courageous! They didn't come to be ? **spent**? 8.46. They didn't come in some sense of being - you know - this is important for me as an individual. They came because they cared about the children of the future. Their children, their grandchildren and the people in our community today.

And so as it always is the case, in terms of those who have suffered most, we should listen with the greatest attentiveness possible. And I think that the Royal Commission did that. And whilst the truth is always painful, nevertheless out of that comes something quite important. And I'll come to that in just a moment.

If I can just reflect on those that did come forward, to bear this in mind: when this abuse occurred the average age of abuse was 11 years of age. Most of those that came forward were abused on multiple occasions, some by multiple people. And so this is something that takes place over time. It's not a quick incident it's not an offense a touch something that is - oh - inappropriate. This is sustained and impacts children at their most vulnerable.

It is true that the majority of those who abuse, over 90 percent are male abusers. It's also true that women can abuse in these circumstances - and did. But their stories, their stories as young people, were so often the same, no matter where the abuse occurred and how it occurred. And the most important thing was that they were not believed. They were not believed by their parents. The more devout they were, the less they were believed. The more devout the family the more connected it was to the church, the more connected it was to the clergy and the religious the less likely that their own children would be believed.

There's a shocking story of a man who was in front of me in a private session. He had told his parents, his mother particularly, that he'd been abused. She would not believe him. Over time the stories of abuse grew and grew, even in relation to the institution that abused him. On her deathbed he went to her and said: *now will you believe me?* And she said *no!* She died for that man, sitting in front of me. What else can you say? When the person he most wanted to believe him couldn't, wouldn't, and didn't!

That's an extreme version of the lack of belief that took place, but as a society we also failed to believe. For so many years we'd listened to the media stories coming; and for so many years our churches, my own, the Catholic Church in particular, dismissed these calls as an exaggeration, an attack on the church, an attack on religion. Tragically, I wish it was so. But it wasn't. And so, today we have to listen to those that suffered the most in our community, because sexual abuse in families continues unabated.

The good news is that sexual abuse within our institutions, including our churches has declined dramatically. And there's a number of reasons for that, including the work that you've done here in creating a Safe Church. The tragedy is, in our families there is no reduction in the level of child sexual abuse, or abuse generally in the families. And that is one of the persistent social problems and shames for Australia today.

Can I just reflect, if I can, on the perpetrators? I met many. I did over 3 or 400 private sessions in prisons of men. I did the men and someone else did the women who had been abused as children. Their pathway was clear: in and out of child protection - Juvenile Justice, prison. Some were sexual offenders. Not many, but some were sexual offenders. The point I just want to raise about this issue is that many of the perpetrators continued to be active participants within the churches.

They were Priests and Ministers. They were sacristans and they were readers. They were members of your community and remain so today! For the vast majority, they were never held to account. They were never tapped on the shoulders! They were never reported to the police. They were never expelled from their organizations.

At first glance we might say that's a shocking thing. But the second thing and the challenge that you face as a church is, as an inclusive, a loving Church - where is their place in our churches? Where was their place in those churches? But one of the most interesting things came with the notion of mercy and forgiveness. The Salvation Army talks about mercy. The Catholic Church talks about forgiveness. I'm not quite sure what the Uniting Church talks about, but it's in there.

One of the challenges was this: there was a public hearing around the boys' homes and girls' homes run by the Salvation Army, where there was significant abuse. And one of the challenges for the commanders, the senior members, was to deal with this notion that God forgives. And of course God forgives. And if God forgives, we the church should forgive!

Perhaps that's true. But then, a young Captain, a woman, she would have been in her late 20s said: *yes, but even if there is forgiveness, even if there is forgiveness, there is also accountability.* And what was happening was that churches were forgiving - but not saying you are accountable! and so one of the great challenges going forward is, if we believe that God is the loving God that we believe in, and he's capable of forgiveness; and we as a church are capable of forgiveness, there is this notion of accountability that still remains! Many of the institutions could not understand this notion that if forgiveness was given that was the end of the story.

There's an even greater challenge, and that is: even if God forgives, surely forgiveness must come from the victim or survivor. Surely she or he is the one that ultimately must be the person that forgives. And so how do we reconcile that? And the truth of the matter is, many of the churches even today, struggle with this notion of a loving God who forgives and of a church that preaches forgiveness - and yet fails to hold people to account in a safe environment.

Just a couple of final reflections. A reflection of myself. I was - there were six Commissioners. I'm the only person, the only one of the six Commissioners that are currently actively engaged in any faith whatsoever. And every week of the five years, two questions would be put to me, particularly, as a Catholic. The first was: *why do you stay with that mob? Every day you hear these stories of what's gone wrong! Why do you stay?* And the second is *how can you believe in some of this stuff?*

Let me deal with the last part. All religions have very strange things in them, some of which I believe wholeheartedly and some of which I have less interest in at all. More so since the Royal Commission. But this first one was even harder! How can you stay with a church where day, day in and day out, you are listening! You, Robert, are listening to this; and part of it to find the goodness in the church. Part of it is to find that which makes us believe! Believe in a loving God. And believe in a community that believes that by being a community, we can enhance our relationship with that loving God.

Well that's hard to say in the presence of so many people that were abused within those settings. But for me it was trying to say: *can the church be something different?* And what struck me were two things. The first was a mantra. Well it's not a mantra it's really the statement of Micah and that is to always *act with Justice, to love with tenderness, and to walk humbly with your God in faithfulness.*

And I found myself, throughout the Royal Commission increasingly going back to that statement. Can we be a church in which we act with Justice? Where we love with tenderness? Where we are faithful to the God that we so believe in? And the conclusion is: yes, I think we can be!

And in parts we are, and in parts we always have been. But that doesn't come about by just saying those words. It comes about by practice. By the belief systems that we have ourselves.

And for the church that came out of the Royal Commission, the biggest challenge I think we've ever heard was from the Parliamentary Inquiry in Victoria, actually, where they talked about a betrayal of trust and the challenge for all churches, Christian and non-Christian alike. For abuse took place in all of those and many other non-church organizations. That challenge is about legitimacy and integrity.

Legitimacy is bestowed by others on us. We do not create legitimacy. As a church or as a people, the world out there says: yes you have legitimacy. The old notion of church in Australia was: we are legitimate! We are church! We are therefore good. We are therefore part of the community! We have a right to be respected!

Not anymore! So where does this legitimacy now come from?

And the second is integrity. And integrity comes from us. From within the way in which we operate.

So how have we responded to those victims and survivors in more recent times? How do we deal with those that are currently being abused, not only children, but others in domestic and Family Violence and so on?

This church here in Pitt Street has a reputation of being an inclusive Church. A church in which the suffering can find great comfort. And has for many, many times. So it is about an inclusive church. But I believe it is a church that seeks the legitimacy from the community by showing that it has changed. And integrity by being true to those things that you've read today in the readings. And as you read every Sunday.

So, in conclusion, let me just quote again from the statement. The actual statement of the Royal Commission said: *Today we say we are sorry. Sorry that you were not protected. Sorry that you were not listened to. For refusing to hear the truth, for refusing to believe the words of children.*

So let me then conclude with Wendy Horder again. Many of the people that I saw, who had been abused in institutions, no longer believed in faith - nor in the institutions. But some did. Some had continued to remain active members of their Church, despite the abuse having taken place by the church and often by senior officials in those churches. Wendy Horder has spent the whole of her adult life seeking to reconcile with her church - the Catholic Church.

In the poems I read, there is that despair. But then there were the poems of great, great hope. But in the back of one of the books she wrote this:

*the more we can learn from these experiences the more we can be truly present to each other to facilitate healing. If survivors and churches work together and can learn from the past and not despair of our future. It is a time of severe testing. Yet it is the time for potential to produce great wisdom, understanding, compassion, healing and revelation.*

She speaks on behalf of those that seek faith, to seek a connection to a church of some description to seek a future not of despair but of hope.

The question: are we open to her? Are we open to them? Are we open to those who, 50 years on from the abuse, 60 years on from the abuse - now seek to be part of these living breathing faith based communities?

For often they would say to me: *I want to reconnect but I can't find a way in! Or: I tried, but they wouldn't let me in.*

So the challenge today is not necessarily a reflection on what happened during the Royal Commission. It's a reflection on our church today. Are we open to those that want to reconnect? Are we prepared to move from despair to hope? Are we prepared, in the words of Wendy Horder, to find wisdom, understanding, compassion, healing?

And be open to the revelation that God will give to us as we move forward again?

Thank you for believing that this statement and recognizing the victims and survivors of child sexual abuse is important.

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<sup>i</sup> Robert Fitzgerald served as Commissioner on the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse and is now Age Discrimination Commissioner with the Australian Human Rights Commission.