

3rd March 2019

Integrity and trust

The hot topic of the week must be addressed. The sharp division within the community over the finding of Cardinal George Pell to be guilty of child sex abuse is not acceptable.

I understand that many people have been shocked that this man has been found guilty of such crimes. If a friend of mine that I had respected for a long time was found guilty of similar crimes I would also find it hard to accept. But for people who have not sat through the entirety of the court proceedings and heard all the evidence that was presented to the jury to be openly challenging, that decision cannot be tolerated. Priority must always be given to victims over personal friendships or biases.

On the one hand, the whole integrity and trust in our justice system is being challenged by people who should know better. Moreover, prominent people who have held high office, or been privileged to write extensively in the media – people of considerable power – taking such a stance in support of a man found by that justice system to be guilty of such crimes, makes it that much harder for those who are the victims of such atrocious crimes to come forward. These crimes are perpetrated by people with power over vulnerable children.

We know from much research into these scenarios how incredibly hard it is for victims of child sexual abuse to come forward. We know they find it hard to acknowledge what has been done to them. We know that a big factor is a fear they will not be believed. And we know they fear that those powerful people who exploited their vulnerability to satisfy their perverted desires, together with their powerful friends in privileged positions, will do everything they can to make them cower away and abandon their fight for recognition and respect.

It is vitally important that those who have suffered such abuse are encouraged to come forward, to be believed, to be listened to, to be loved, and to be empowered to claim their self-dignity. The church above all others must make ourselves vulnerable by encouraging victims to come forward and to humbly do everything we can to bring healing and hope to these broken people.

If anyone reading this is troubled in any way please do speak to me. Our church is very welcoming and is at pains to make ourselves available to you. Please do not feel you need to deal with this by yourself in isolation. If you prefer, contact the National Sexual Assault, Domestic and Family Violence Counselling Service on 1800RESPECT (1800 737 732), Lifeline on 131 114, or Beyond Blue on 1300 224 636.

10th March 2019

The story of our faith

I've been thinking a bit about 'story' this week. What makes a story a good story (or a bad story)? What role do stories make in our lives? We have a second-hand book library in the Drop-In Centre that is laden with all manner of stories. The reality is that stories fill our lives in the way that water fills the lives of fish. Stories are so all-pervasive that we practically cease to be aware of them.

"The narratives of the world are without number...the narrative is present at all times, in all places, in all societies; the history of narrative begins with the history of mankind; there does not exist, and never has existed, a people without narratives." (Barthes)

Most of us will have been lucky enough to be brought up with lots of children's story books to read and enjoy. I remember the first series that I read vociferously was the *Billabong* stories. Perhaps that's why I enjoy the outback parts of our country so much.

But we will also have been surrounded by other stories – the stories that our families told, or perhaps the stories that they lived without actually putting them into words. Some of those stories will have nourished our souls, while others may have been destructive. Should we reflect on those stories, we will appreciate how formative stories are in how we think about ourselves now, and how we understand the world we live in.

Many of us were perhaps lucky enough to grow up in a home in which Bible stories were a normative part of life. And they have provided a valuable foundation for our lives. But we need to remind ourselves that many of the people we will find ourselves working alongside, or attending various groups and activities alongside, increasingly have not had that background.

It would make for interesting conversation to explore with those people the kinds of stories that were commonplace in the home they grew up in. How have those stories shaped who they are now, and how they interact with the world?

Perhaps we need to do the same with the stories we have grown up with. Stories are what connect us with our past, inform our present, and call us into the future. So let's be conscious and wise in the stories that we feed into the core of our being.

Jesus was crystal clear about the story that lay at the core of his being and it inspired him, sustained him, galvanised him, and filled him with faith, hope and love – most of all love.

Let's reclaim the central story of our faith at the centre of our lives this Lent.

17th March 2019

Sacred space

It's SunFest weekend! Yahoo. I can tell that we are all wildly excited. Well ... perhaps not. After all, it's been going on for 43 years, and perhaps it's not 'our cup of tea', so to speak. And perhaps by Sunday morning we are feeling rather tired and 'over it'.

But there is no doubting that there will be a buzz around the Village Green all weekend (weather permitting) that we won't often experience. Many people will have walked through the doors of the church and wandered around the Trash & Treasure stall in the hall. Many will even have come through the doors into the Chapel space of our church. Something of who we are, we who meet here regularly, will have been encountered. Something of what we believe will have been encountered. It's a strange psychological thing how the psychology of the space remains even when it is being used for another purpose.

A number of years back, a church strategy guru from the US was very strong about the need to regularly hold some 'community days' in the church to puncture the psychological perimeter barrier that many people feel. If people feel comfortable and welcomed into the chapel space on a Saturday, even just to enjoy a Devonshire Tea, they will find it easier to walk through those same doors for other events, perhaps even Sunday worship.

I remember an exercise we did as part of our Christian education studies with Denham Grierson many years ago. We were invited to wander around the Chapel at Newman College and be attuned to what we were sensing as we wandered. I discovered there was a point part way down the chapel that I was reluctant to step beyond. I couldn't see anything that marked that line, either in the carpet, or the brickwork of the walls, or in the ceiling. Yet there was a line I felt I should not cross. I discovered as we gathered back outside that there used to be a rail across that exact place that separated the laity from the sanctuary which only the priest went. The psychology remained even though there was no visible evidence of the change.

Who we are when we gather, how we interact with one another in our gathering, how we worship, whether we are a joyful people or a sombre people, in some mysterious way are absorbed into the space. That's worth thinking about as we gather together and participate in our worship and fellowship.

24th March 2019

The Light of the World

The tragedy that unfolded in Christchurch Friday week ago left me numb and not knowing exactly how to talk about it. It didn't seem to me that there were words that could adequately give voice to the emotions that stirred deep within my soul. But there is a need for us to find words. We can't keep silent without empowering the dark forces that have given space for such hatred and fear to erupt in such a violent manner. Those dark forces are present in our society and have been given far too much rein by our politicians. Societies that are so profoundly fractured around such issues as where we say our prayers, or the name we use for God, or the country it was our lot to be born in, inevitably fail. History makes that very clear to us. Yet we find history's lessons hard to learn.

Yet I have struggled to find words with which to engage the discourse that we must engage in with our community. I'm glad my children are old enough, and have developed the ethical framework and intellect to think their way through this issue. But until last night I did not have words with which to address this matter with my grandchildren that Sue and I will spend this weekend with. Like some mothers who reportedly turned their TVs off, we have perhaps wanted to turn the whole thing off, as though it would just go away. Last night Sammy J, better known as a comedian, but increasingly an insightful political commentator, provided me with those words.

Whether you are an adult struggling to frame this tragedy for yourself, or whether you are a parent and don't know how to talk about this with your children, this episode of *Sammy J's Playground Politics* is for you. It could easily be a sermon on the Gospel of Jesus Christ. The scriptures so often tell us to "Fear not!" that Christ is the "Light of the world", calling us to carry the light of Christ in our lives. And perhaps, with me, you often think that that is easy for the writer to say but not so easy for me to live.

This episode from *Series 2 Monsters* is a gift to us. I encourage you to watch it. You can watch it by following this link: <https://iview.abc.net.au/show/sammy-j/series/2/video/LE1806V007S00>

31st March 2019

A Christian? Or a good citizen ?

I always love a 'Once upon a time ...' story. They often have a moral imbedded in them. This one is no different. I share it with you to provoke your thoughtfulness on the matter it addresses:

"Once upon a time, Christianity was illegal and regarded as a threat to society and to traditional family values. The empire tried to stamp it out by force, but the more they persecuted it, the more it grew. Then one day, the empire changed tack. Instead of persecuting the Christian church, the empire adopted it as its own. Whether this was sincere decision or a calculating and strategic one, we will never know for sure, but adopting Christianity into the empire neutered it far more effectively than persecution ever had.

What it did most effectively, and is still doing fairly effectively today, was to collapse people's images of what it means to be good Christian into their images of what it means to be a good citizen of the society. You see this at its most glaringly obvious in the idea that patriotism or nationalism is a Christian duty. I think that that is why an actively church-going Christian prime minister like Scott Morrison can still advocate horrific inhumane treatment of refugees and asylum seekers. Neighbours are those we live alongside, inside our national borders, and so the call to love our neighbours isn't seen to conflict with rejecting and mistreating outsiders.

So we end up with the common misconception that all good law-abiding citizens are more or less good Christians, unless they identify with some other religion, in which case so long as they are still law-abiding and friendly, we'll grant that they are good Muslims or good Buddhists or whatever. The empire can adopt any religion and every religion, so long as it can be collapsed into loyalty to nation, obedience to the law, and friendly relations with one's neighbours. And thus, even in Australia where very few people attend church, it is still quite common to hear descriptions like, 'He's a really good bloke. Devoted to his wife and kids. Loves his neighbour. A real Christian.'

Whereas, in fact, if there was no such thing as Christianity, this bloke's behaviour would be no different. It would just be described as good citizenship. A generalised niceness that doesn't make trouble for your neighbours or disturb the peace..."

[Nathan Nettleton posted by Laughing Bird 24 February copyright 2019.

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