

Twenty Third Sunday in Ordinary Time Child Protection Sunday

Throughout this last week (3-9 September), National Child Protection Week has invited all Australians to play their part to promote the safety and wellbeing of children and young people. The National Committee for Professional Standards, a committee of the Australian Catholic Bishops and Catholic Religious Australia, has subsequently put before us the theme, "See Me, Hear Me" for this Sunday when we commemorate the importance of the safety of children in our community of faith. Today I am drawing upon the homily notes prepared for this day by Fr. David Ranson, a priest of the Archdiocese of Sydney. He asks us first, with what commitment do we take notice of our children's safety? With what responsibility do we seek to ensure that our communities are places of safety for them?

Fr. Ranson reminds us that children are the delight both of our families and our communities. When we gaze upon a child we are caught intensely between an immediate experience of the present and a heightened expectation of the future, between a "fulfilled moment and the beginning of a new day." Yet, sadly we know that the innocence of youth has not always been treasured and protected in our community. For nearly

thirty years now we have been subjected to the constant exposure of the way in which, in certain circumstances, that innocence has been betrayed, and in many cases destroyed. The litany of complaints of the sexual abuse of children within our community has become a wound that has yet to discover its healing. Waiting upon the Final Report of the Royal Commission into institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse, we have been forced to move beyond a consideration that such disclosures are about the criminal behaviour of a few. We are no longer afforded the delusion that these disclosures are just about the failings of a few that bring shame to us all. It is critical for us as we enter this moment with the greatest humility, that we are ready to be radically self-reflective, eager to learn, open to conversion.

The outcome of such learning will be growth in our identity as communities of reconciliation, genuine Resurrection communities, to which the Gospel of Matthew today (Matt 8:15-20) impels us. Becoming such a community of reconciliation and Resurrection, as in Matthew's framework, is not an instant project. It occurs in our commitment to see and to hear particularly those who are vulnerable, and those whose voice is too often overlooked. The Jewish mystic and feminist, Simone Weil, recounted in one of her

insightful essays that in the first legend of the Holy Grail, it is said that the Grail belongs to the first comer who asks the guardian of the vessel, a king three quarters paralyzed by the most painful wound, "What are you going through? Only when Parsifal has learnt how to ask this question is he ready to receive the Grail, that the king once paralyzed retrieves his health, and vitality is restored to the land. In Weil's words, only when Parsifal has learnt how to attend to the other, as a person, only when he has learnt how to gaze upon the other full of attention, emptying himself of his own agenda to receive the truth of the person he is encountering, does true healing occur for the kingdom.

The theme of our Child Protection Sunday calls us to this radical attitude of spirit. Weil thus presents us a metaphor for our own healing in the face of the experience of the wound at the heart of our life as Church. It is only as we learn to encounter persons, and especially our children, full of attentiveness, that new horizons can possibly disclose themselves. Conversation begins with a listening heart. Listening reveals our desire to learn and to grow through understanding the wisdom others offer - especially the young, for as St Benedict reminded us in the 6th century, "the Lord often reveals what is better to the

younger" (RB 3:2). It involves the suspension of our viewpoint to attempt to truly hear and understand another. Listening is a complex process, and we need to develop our listening skills to be able to sort through all we might hear to get to the essential truth of a situation. The presence or absence of listening, especially to the young and to those who are vulnerable, acts as the barometer of our health and vitality as a Church.

With a listening heart, our heart that sees and hears, we are called to enter a conversation which might become a means of conversion, a different way of acting. The Royal Commission, itself, in its own commitment to change society, has sought to do this by listening to the accounts of more than 1400 young Australians about their own experience of safety. It revealed that change for the greater protection of our most vulnerable will occur only as we respect them, ask what they are going through, watch what others are doing regarding them, listen to what they are trying to tell us, do what we are supposed to do for them, inform them about danger, and stand up and speak out for them. In so doing, we maintain our most treasured within a strong experience of connection, within the nurturing bonds of community - the calibre of the truly Christian community about which the Gospel of Matthew proposes to us today.