

Domestic-and-Family-Violence-Aware Sunday

Rev'd Peter Balabanski

Acts 9 1-6, Psalm 30, Revelation 5 11-14, John 21 1-19

There's a recurrent theme in the today's scriptures. In the readings from Acts, the Psalm and the Gospel, we see a person being brought back from the brink to a place of safety and healing. That's central to the issue we've been called to focus on today. We've been called to think, pray and act on the horrifying epidemic of domestic and family violence against women and children. And we have to make sure this parish is a place of safety and healing for anyone who needs us.

Domestic and Family Violence is abusive behaviour that's used to control or harm someone in an intimate relationship. It endangers their safety and well-being. It has many faces: coercive control, emotional abuse, verbal abuse, financial abuse, psychological abuse, spiritual abuse, physical abuse, and sexual abuse. And a child witnessing Domestic and Family Violence is suffering child abuse.

Domestic and family violence is rife in Australia and around the world. There's a world-wide social-media epidemic presenting misogyny and the sexual degradation of women and children as normal; undermining their dignity and their humanity. We Australians export it to more traditional societies through tourism, the internet, and even through some distortions of our Christian teaching. This must stop!

Domestic and family violence is a terrible cause of suffering for many people in the Australian community, and we know the Church is not exempt from this. In fact, a 2021 survey revealed that *in our churches* more than one in three women and

one in seven men report that they have experienced violence. That's *in our churches!* And women are far more likely to be impacted by sexual and physical assault and sexual harassment. And yes, this is *in the Anglican Church of Australia*.

Some church leaders compound the abuse suffered by survivors of domestic and family violence because they wrongly counsel these people to stay in their abusive marriages – telling them to *go back and forgive; try to prevent the violence*.

Forgiveness should never mean accepting the continuation of violence. And nor is it anyone's duty to manage how another adult expresses their anger. Everybody feels anger. But to express that anger through violence is a choice. So domestic violence is *emphatically not* the responsibility of its survivor. It's the choice, the action and entirely the responsibility of its perpetrator. No ifs or buts!

Some church leaders give wrong advice to stay in an abusive marriage because they read, in a simplistic, literal way, four or five passages from the New Testament. ^{1 Cor 14:34-35, Eph 5:22-23, 1 Tim}

^{2:11-12, 1 Pet 2:18-3:7, Matt 19:3-12} On the basis of this handful of first-century Mediterranean cultural teachings, some church leaders insist that even where there's domestic violence, wives should submit to their husbands; should forgive; should obey. We know this is often lethal advice. The 2021 survey showed that domestic violence is actually worse in some church contexts than in the wider community, often in the name of these scriptures. If this advice to submit and forgive has ever been given to you or to anyone you know, please hear my apology on behalf of a very fallible Church. Jesus would never have done that to you.

The patterns of Domestic and Family Violence tell us that it is not a one-off matter of the perpetrator *losing it* or *snapping* – *doing something out of character*. No, it's part of a pattern of controlling, belittling, abusive behaviour; an

attitude which is the choice of the perpetrator. It's a reflection of the perpetrator's true character.

Domestic Violence is a vile thing and it has no place in any family or relationship – ever! And that goes even more emphatically for the Church, which must be a place of safety and healing. We know how Jesus cared for abused and suffering people. He defended them and challenged their abusers. We are committed to follow his example and teaching; called to follow him, as we saw in today's scriptures.

We are called by Christ to be communities of healing, of safety, of generosity and respect; called to believe and advocate for survivors of this violence. And we are called to defend survivors from perpetrators, and to challenge perpetrators to turn from the attitudes and actions that they've chosen to live by. We are called to help such people re-form their characters into the image of Christ – just as we should all be striving to do with our own lives.

The Anglican Church's Families and Culture Commission have launched this first Domestic and Family Violence Awareness Sunday to call everyone in the Church to shine a light on this issue. Because abuse thrives if it can hide in shadows. If we turn our backs and say it doesn't have anything to do with us, that's to condone it. And we know all too well what happens then. The Church has done that for years to innocent children. We have to make sure the Church is *not* a safe place for abusers to hide. No, we must be a safe place where survivors are believed, supported, healed and protected; given back a chance at wholeness and hope. Amen