

The Children Act 1989 was a complete game-changer for anyone who had anything at all to do with children. It arose as a result of some shocking public revelations about systemic child abuse in the context of places and organisations where children ought to have felt safe, and it seems to me that we are still after so many years only starting properly to come to terms with its provisions and requirements.

The child protection elements of the Act began to bite in schools not long after I began to teach, and after the many briefing papers we received telling us about the Act's existence and provisions, we were finally told that we would all have to go on training, in cohorts, to understand what we had to do. After all, corporal punishment had been legally banned only three years prior to the passing of the Children Act, so there was a real need for a change in attitudes and practices.

The first training required comprised a three-day module, including two overnights, with the promise of something similar as a follow-up. I never got called to take part in such a training module; suffice it to say that by the time I had to go, the demands of expense and common sense had reduced this to a two-and-a-half hour twilight session with some homework. This session was actually well-delivered and informative, maybe because it *was* concentrated and there was no time for extensive ice-breakers, role-plays and such like.

I am starting this week's Lent Address in this way because of the reality which underlies every sort of abuse of others – the misuse of power. Where an unequal power relationship exists, there is always the potential for abuse of some sort, and quite rightly this is emphasised in the training I and many others with positions of responsibility in the Church have to undergo periodically.

In the Friday discussion group we wrestled somewhat with the way in which Jesus refuses to submit to the patterns of worldly power, and the very active way he identifies in his teaching and practice with those who have no power at all in the eyes of the world. Examples of this include: the parable of the rich man and Lazarus (Lk 16.19-31); the Judgement scene in Matthew 25 ('Just as you did it to the least of these my brethren, you did it to me.');

and the several places where he tells his followers that he did not come to be served, but to serve.

The whole scene from Jn 19, where Pilate presents Jesus to the crowds, first saying 'Here is the man', and later even saying "Here is your King' is full of bitter irony and mockery that such a man might have the slightest claim to be a king – or indeed to be fully human. It is the ultimate in the sort of dehumanising behaviour that characterises and seeks to legitimise the worst sorts of exploitation and indeed all too often genocide, throughout human history.

As we remembered again this morning, the cross of Jesus is no glorious and easily explained image of salvation; rather is it a symbol of shame and failure for the one hung on it. His only hope – and ours too – lies in the promise that when the temple of his body is destroyed, he will raise it up again in three days – not as a *sign* of new life, but the *way* of new life open to all who are not held back by their own illusions or pretensions of power.

Given the clarity of both the teaching and the example of Jesus, it comes to some people as a surprise that the Church displays a long and sorry history of the misuse of power. And here I am not just talking about the Papal States and the Inquisition, or the many religious wars destructive of lives and livelihoods, or indeed the institutions like the Magdalen Laundries where single mothers were

sent to work out their penance for falling pregnant while suffering horrifically both physically and mentally at the treatment that was supposed to make them spiritually pleasing to God again – let alone the fates in adoptive families of many of their children born out of wedlock and condemned all their lives to be considered second-class by anyone who knew where they had come from.

I am talking about the spectacular public mess the Church of England has got itself in over appropriate and consistent investigation and treatment of perpetrators of a variety of forms of abuse, together with the number of times it has succumbed to the instinct to cover up the sins of those in authority, and its woeful record of dealing with survivors. The Roman Catholic Church is not far behind on this, but as in other matters, their dirty linen does not seem to get washed quite as publicly as ours.

In fact, I feel a great deal for the teams trying on the ground to make some sense of safeguarding within the Church. If they are like our own diocesan team, they are excellent practitioners, working above and beyond the call of duty to manage an impossible workload, and they do so often without the level of recognition and thanks which in human terms they are due. In some ways they are also victims of the long history of people who have used their faith and the power of the Church as camouflage for their own abusive practices, and not least the abuses of hierarchical powers by clergy and others which have left, and continue to leave, so many souls spiritually wounded. Yes, those little ones are the beloved of the Father, and it is our role to protect them and keep them safe, not to leave them spiritually damaged and hung up to dry.

If you are immune to terminal depression at the sinful state of the Church, you might take a look at some of the writings of the late Bishop of Buckingham, Alan

Wilson, who has been for a long time a lone voice speaking out for the survivors and others who have found the Church a place not of safety but a predatory jungle where power has worked out its most subtle of corruptions. Bishop Alan's recent untimely death has robbed the Church of someone who really understood the teaching of Jesus about power, and the way in which the Cross is the only antidote to that destructive aspect of human nature.

I think of him – and the survivors and other misprized and despised people he supported – when I read the Studdert Kennedy verse with which Michael Marshall finishes his chapter on the Power Game:

*High and lifted up I see him, on the eternal Calvary,
And two pierced hands are stretching east and west o'er land and sea.
On my knees I fall and worship that great Cross that shines above,
For the very God of Heaven is not Power, but Power of Love.*

But I don't want to conclude tonight's Address without an element of hope, without some sort of key to interpreting what is going on, and certainly I do want to leave us with something that can help us avoid the temptation to succumb to a version of Newton's Third Law of Motion, by confronting the abuse of power with an equal and opposite abuse of power in the vain hope of maybe balancing things out.

In the Cross – and again in the teaching of Jesus – there is at least this clarity: that things are not what they seem to the cruelly judgemental eye, and that there is a way we can at least begin to understand how God's Power in Christ works so differently from our own understanding and practice of Power.

Some of you will know of the esteem in which I hold the current Archbishop of Milan, Mario Delpini, and I am always interested in following his teachings. This

year, as in other years, he is travelling around his diocese – the largest in Europe – to take part in live stagings of the Way of the Cross. A week last Friday he went to Oggiono, on Lake Como, to walk the Way of the Cross acted out by parishioners, and accompanied by servers and a couple of priests in cassocks, cottas and stoles with one of them a flat cap and another a beanie to keep out the cold. This is what he said at the start:

Lord Jesus, why did you choose mediocre men?

You chose people who were far from ideal: your words were a puzzle to them and they did not understand; your signs, far from being welcomed as a revelation, an invitation to enter into your mystery, caused them rather discomfort and fear.

You chose from the mediocre: perhaps they followed you to get away from their boring work rather than because they were intrigued by the idea of becoming fishers of men, messengers of your Kingdom.

You chose from the unworthy: still at the end, after years of sharing their lives with you who came not to be served but to serve, they were busy discussing who would be considered the greatest and who would sit at your right hand and at your left.

You chose from the self-seeking: quick to make promises, instantly unable to keep them, courageous in their words and fearful in embarrassment like Peter in the courtyard, denying you three times.

You chose fragile and incapable people: they can't even find the strength to stay awake at the time of trial, in the garden of olives; weighed down by fatigue they slept while you faced your hour of fear and misery.

You chose people who let themselves be easily overcome by fear: at the time of your arrest they left you and disappeared.

You chose untrustworthy people: Judas who betrayed you; Peter who denied you; all of them who ran away.

You chose insignificant people: in the circle of your friends there are plenty of those who say nothing at all, who do nothing that is worth remembering.

You chose people who got it wrong. You could have chosen people like Simon of Cyrene, who helped you carry the cross in your hour of need.

Why, Lord, did you choose nobodies, people who were so mediocre and inadequate?

I chose not out of merit, but out of love, because I wanted to have friends.

I chose men and women whom I loved. I chose for friendship, not for merit. I chose men and women not for their effectiveness, for their competence, nor for their holiness, but because I wanted friends. I chose men and women not because they deserved it, but because I wanted to share with them my relationship with the Father, the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, the commandment of charity. I did not choose them for their ability, but so that they might become able; not because they were saints, but so that they could become saints. I did not choose them because they were rich in gifts and in promises, but so that they might receive gifts in abundance.

I chose imperfect men and women, just like you.

Just like the Twelve, nobodies, mediocre, inadequate, I have chosen you.

And that is why I have chosen you. You did not choose me, but I have chosen you, imperfect men and women, miserable sinners – and I loved you and gave my life for you. There is no greater love than that which gives life itself for its friends. I didn't choose you because you are saints, but to give you the grace to become saints.

And that is why I invite you to follow me. Come to the place called the Skull, in Hebrew Golgotha. Come and stand under the cross with Mary and the beloved disciple: hear my last words, the calling I give you to welcome my mother, to make up the new community born of the Spirit I pour out for you.

You – imperfect people – be part of the Church! Don't judge the Church like those who stand afar off and wag their heads because they see nothing but fault, and are consumed with criticism.

Be part of the Church: it's nothing odd if the community is imperfect, not up to its mission: after all, it's made up of imperfect and inadequate men and women.

Welcome each other within the Church, don't think you're better than anyone else, rather receive the Spirit to live out your vocation – and maybe – who knows? – to leave other people and the world a little better for it.

Yes – I have chosen you too, the mediocre.

And that – my friends – is where the power of the Cross of Christ really lies.

PC, 3rd March 2024