



25 January 2015
The Conversion of St Paul
Choral Evensong
Joel 2 vv. 12–17
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The Examined Life: Reflections on Mind and Spirit After Abuse

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It has been clear for many years now that one of life's less comfortable facts is that sometimes people abuse the power they have over others, and betray the trust which is vested in them. As we a society have become more aware of the abuse of children and vulnerable adults, we have invested significant resources in processes and practices which we call 'Safeguarding'.

'Safeguarding' is only part of the response to the abuse of the vulnerable, however. Another aspect of the response is that of the legal system to those who have perpetrated abuse. When abuse is illegal it needs to be treated as such, and as we know, the news headlines have all too regularly been dominated by the trials of people who are well known. In many more cases people are prosecuted and imprisoned with no one much noticing, apart from family, friends and acquaintances. The male prison population in this country is getting much older as this process goes on – there often being a huge time lag between offence and prosecution. This leads people to use the term 'historic child abuse'. It means to refer to events that happened many years ago. The phrase is misleading if it suggests that the effects and consequences of the abuse are historical. For one thing we know about abuse of children is that the physical, emotional and spiritual wounds and consequences can persist not only for days weeks and months, but for years, decades and lifetimes.

A few days ago I was speaking with a leading activist and campaigner in this area. He made the point that whenever he speaks about the subject he assumes that there will be people present who have been on the receiving end of child abuse, and that there may well be those who have inflicted it too. Of course there is no certainty about this, and different people take different views about just how occasional, prevalent or endemic child abuse is in our society. However, the question of the severity of the impact of abuse on the victim, and the enormity of the evil involved in its perpetration, is not a quantitative question. One incident of child abuse is one too many, and any words which might be heard to minimize extent or impact must be avoided.

A sense of the sensitivity of the subject is one reason why a preacher should be careful in the way they address it, and I have wondered whether it is a reason to avoid it altogether. Certainly it's not a subject that is often addressed from the pulpit. And yet to fail to talk in church about something that is so often in the papers seems to me to be a dereliction of ministerial duty; not least in an area where one of the mechanisms of cruelty and evil is coerced silence, 'this must be our secret', and where silence is self-inflicted because the power of shame is so smothering – both for perpetrators, and for victims.

There are those, perhaps, who would see this subject as relatively straightforward. After abuse the crime should be reported, the perpetrator dealt with according to the law, and the victim be given support and counseling to him or her move on. Of course I don't think it is anything like this simple, either in theory or in practice, and yet this simple little model has much to commend it compared with some responses. And the church, I am sorry to say, is often the source of responses which range from the collusive to the re-abusive. It is well known that for many years reports of abuse were dismissed, disbelieved or denied by church authorities of various denominations, and that at the same time clerical perpetrators were quietly moved on, quite possibly to places where they could continue the habit of abuse. The whistle has been blown on such practices now, and reports written and better policies and practices implemented. But the reports make shameful reading and have shaken the faith of many.

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There are other inappropriate responses too. A recent book by Sue Atkinson ('Struggling to Forgive' Monarch Books, 2014), explores many examples of inept and inappropriate pastoral response, not least the sort that is based on what she calls the 'weird theology' that puts huge pressure on the victim of abuse to forgive the perpetrator.

I have heard, and heard of, so many bad sermons about forgiveness that I have no doubt that this is true, and it is to me just as worrying a response to abuse as is the institutional cover up. You could call it the pastoral beat-up. I have no doubt that people experience this as re-abuse. It is all about putting pressure on a vulnerable and frightened person to do something they are not comfortable with, and quite probably invoking God's authority. 'You know you must forgive others everything they do to you' says the possibly well-meaning but nonetheless manipulative pastor, 'it says it in the Bible and you pray it in the Lord's Prayer.'

Let me be very clear about what I am saying here. Do I mean that child abuse is the ultimate, unforgivable sin? No. I don't think that there is any limit to God's capacity to forgive, unless the person whom God seeks to forgive and transform into a new person actively resists: this is the sin against the Holy Spirit which is the only unforgivable sin. To be clear, this is the sin of willfully and determinedly keeping God out of your life and away from all aspects of yourself that might need to be forgiven. Under these conditions God can't forgive because God can't get close enough to forgive.

But to say that God can forgive is not to say that the actual victim of abuse is, or should be, placed under any pressure whatsoever even to think about it. One of the most important lessons that I try to offer whenever I speak about forgiveness is that there are three distinct types: God's forgiveness, the forgiveness of one person by another, and self-forgiveness. If we had a few hours we could talk about how the three connect and relate, but one thing I hope you take away from this sermon is the clear message that the forgiveness questions are among the last that should ever cross the mind of the victim of abuse who is beginning to come to terms with their experience by sharing it with others; something which typically takes place only many years later.

Now let me add a few points of clarification. It's sexual abuse that catches the headlines but that's not the only form by any means. Neglect, bullying, and cruelty - physical and mental - can all be deeply abusive. And nor are all abusers males. Women abuse too, and many who abuse are not the overtly nasty types but pleasant, friendly people who have a high degree of empathy, by which they gain the trust and access that are later exploited in abuse. The other thing to say is that most abuse is not perpetrated by strangers, or adults who insinuate themselves across the normal domestic boundaries, or by clergy, but by members of the same household and family.

I hope that I have said enough to convince you that abuse is not a simple matter from any perspective. I hope that I can also convince you that the impact of abuse on people is not simple either. Psychologists and others have researched this and come up with long lists including emotions like fear, guilt, shame and anger; behaviours like self-harm or even suicide; and experiences like depression and even psychosis. For those whose trust has been betrayed, the whole subject of trust becomes difficult. For those who know that they have been subjected by a powerful other, then questions of how to respond to the power of other people, or how to manage your own personal or positional power, also emerge. For people of faith, spiritual and theological questions emerge – how could God allow this? Why did God let it happen to me? And where the abuser is a religious representative, people have reported that it is as if the abuse is being perpetrated by God.

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Having said all that, you will not expect me to offer any magic-wand method for putting matters right. I do, however, think that there are a few things that can be said that might be helpful for people coping after the abuse of themselves or someone they know.

The first thing is that to feel confused, ambiguous and bad about it is normal. It is also normal to think that you can't tell anyone about it.

Second, finding someone who you can trust with this, and who is caring and robust enough to share something of your emotional journey, is almost certainly the most helpful thing you can do.

Thirdly, if this has been your experience, or a friend tells you that it is theirs, then it is wise to be in touch with one of the agencies which offers support to people who have had similar experience – check out the NAPAC website for instance. www.napac.org.uk

Fourth, it is important to remember that any healing of the words of abuse is going to take time, and that sometimes will feel painful itself, just as the healing process after more simple physical or mental wounds.

And fifth, because abuse is complex and impacts on many aspects of who a person is, then the onward journey is also complex. One book ('Shattered Soul? Five Pathways to Healing the Spirit after Abuse and Trauma' by Patrick Flemming. Wordstream Publishing 2011) talks of five different pathways, the first three of which are the pathways of courage, grief and anger.

Courage – to move forward after abuse really takes guts.

Grief – to move forward involves engaging with the sadness and loss that is caught up with being abused.

Anger (the author actually calls this 'holy anger') this is allowing yourself to experience all the indignation that is appropriate when you let yourself realize that this should never have happened.

That anger might also of course be directed at God. It's really important to experience that anger – but also not to be trapped by it.

And that is perhaps the key belief that allows for any healing or transformation after abuse. Namely the Christian belief that however dark the past, the light of Christ is stronger; that however awful the torture, the healing of Christ is deeper; and that ultimately, while it might seem that we have died inside, deeper within is the true soul-self that God desires to restore to fullness of life.

Christianity is predicated on the faith that God in Christ is with us in our deepest need, and darkest loneliness; that God in Christ raises us from whatever form of death in life is inflicted on us; and that God in Christ gives us the grace in the fullness of time to say that although I have been a victim there will come a time when, with Christ, I will be not only a survivor but a victor, standing with him on the glorious dawn of an utterly unexpected Easter.

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