



Homily
Thirtieth Sunday in Ordinary Time
2020 National Day of Sorrow and Promise

Newman College
University of Melbourne

Fr Frank Brennan SJ
Rector

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Exodus 22:20-26; 1 Thessalonians 1:5-10; Matthew 22:34-40



Listen at <https://soundcloud.com/frank-brennan-6/homily-251020>

At the beginning of his new encyclical *Fratelli Tutti*, Pope Francis speaks of his inspiration Francis of Assisi as the ‘saint of fraternal love, simplicity and joy’ who ‘felt himself a brother to the sun, the sea and the wind, yet he knew that he was even closer to those of his own flesh. Wherever he went, he sowed seeds of peace and walked alongside the poor, the abandoned, the infirm and the outcast, the least of his brothers and sisters.’

Today is the National Day of Sorrow and Promise when we hold the victims of child sexual abuse in our church front and centre acknowledging our sin, weeping in the name of our Church, and begging forgiveness for the wrong we have done. We hope to sow seeds of peace walking alongside those wanting to invite us to accompany them on their journey of truth, justice and healing. Understanding those who would not want us to accompany them on such a journey, we hold them silently in prayer.

What can any priest say on such a day, seeking to break open the word of today’s gospel where Jesus makes love of God and love of neighbour inseparable, telling us that ‘on these two commandments hang the whole law, and the Prophets also’? In Matthew’s gospel, Jesus constantly returns to this idea of the law and the Prophets being fulfilled in one. During the sermon on the mount, he had said, ‘So always treat others as you would like them to treat you; that is the meaning of the Law and the Prophets.’ (7:12) What can any of us who lived an ideal childhood oblivious to any abuse happening in our church or society say or do, seeking to treat those who have suffered abuse as we would like them to treat us?

First we must listen. And even though we’ve now had years of revelations with commissions of inquiry and raised public awareness, there’s still a lot of listening we need to do, particularly when it comes to the spiritual violence and hurt caused by a priest violating a child, when the child has nowhere to turn, thinking that parents would find even the suggestion of violation an impossible abomination. Much has changed and for the better, hopefully reducing the prospect of future abuse. But the pain, suffering, destruction and spiritual desolation of past abuse remains.

Recently a survivor Wendy Holder reached out to me. One of her brothers is an alumnus of Newman College. Wendy suffered the most appalling abuse by not one, but two priests - first when she was aged 12, having moved interstate at a time of great vulnerability and need for pastoral care after the death of her brother, and then when she was transitioning to university. She is a psychologist. She is on a journey beginning ‘to understand the impact of child sexual abuse by religious people on a child’s spiritual development, and the resultant damage to their adult spiritual formation’. She found sanctuary at Mary MacKillop Place during Easter 2018 and then a couple of times at the Benedictine Abbey at Jamberoo the following year. Thank God for such sanctuaries where religious women can provide a haven amidst the wonders of creation. Wendy published her reflections of her visits to MacKillop Place and the Jamberoo Abbey: *Poetry of a Survivor*.

Wendy writes: ‘One of the most profound effects that some survivors of child clergy sexual abuse experience is of abandonment. It can appear that God has treated them like this, abused them and then abandoned them. Abandonment can leave deep wounds in the very psyche of how someone sees themselves. It can lead to a distorted perception of God and the world and this distortion can become more apparent when they immerse themselves in a religious environment. The more that we can understand their experiences the more we can be truly present to each other to facilitate healing. If survivors and churches work together we can learn from the past and not despair of our future. It is a time of severe testing for all of us and as

such has the potential to produce great wisdom, understanding, compassion, healing and revelation.'

Wendy has kindly agreed to my sharing a couple of her poems from Jamberoo. In *Monster God* she describes the experience of the 12 year old child devastated by her older brother's death wondering about his salvation, coming to the priest seeking pastoral care and theological enlightenment, venturing tentatively on to holy ground only to have this predator whisper his threat of eternal damnation:

What happens to people like us
The ones who can't be forgiven

There's a Man who walks beside me
telling a story
about who I am

It's not true

This ethereal Man made me
the receptacle of the
sins of the damned

This made me weak

He mocked and scorned
and with contempt
He handed me
a life-long penance

And if I dared to venture on Holy ground
that's when he whispered
His threat of eternal damnation

It broke my soul

I've lived with the pain
most of my life
It does not scare me anymore
Because now I know this Monster God
grew out of the sins of man

What can they do to me
that I haven't already done to myself
A million times over?

Now I can live a different life
and tell my story of love desired
And perhaps one day
I will find my soul
embedded in that pain

Last year, Wendy was in the midst of nature at Jamberoo relishing the nuns attending to the Office of the Hours. Contemplating a crucifix carved from Huon Pine by her late husband Joseph Steele Holder, she traces her own paschal mystery of passion, death and resurrection recalling the previous Easter in the poem *Easter 2018*:

The pilgrimage began
on a road that could not be seen.
Transported back through
a wasteland of years
to a child of utter devotion.

Upon her knees
at the foot of the cross
You rose and fell under
the cross of man.
The essence of humanity.

Mercy stopped you along the way
and through open wounds
You Poured your love.
The essence of compassion.

Even the sun and moon paused
to mourn your death
Such was scale of grief and lament.
The essence of sacrifice.

Shadowed in the fading light
the vigil keepers
shook with fear.
The essence of abandonment.

With great tenderness
You embraced the child
and darkness became
an endless day.
Oh blessed, blessed night:
The essence of faith.

A new day beginning
a deeper communion.
The seasons of her heart
have led her home.
I sit with Joy and weep for You

Wendy experienced the Jamberoo Abbey as ‘a place where you can enter into the integrity of the authentic spirit of the Catholic Church’. As well as listening attentively, as well as praying earnestly, we all need to commit ourselves to being and to creating sanctuaries and safe havens where those survivors who wish can seek for fraternal love, simplicity and joy amongst the pain, loss, confusion and risk of further trauma through contorted processes of redress, compensation, and public accountability.

In today’s first reading from Exodus, Yahweh gives Moses a message for the people of Israel. They are not to molest, oppress or be harsh with the stranger, the widow, or the orphan. And ‘if you are harsh with them, they will surely cry out to me, and be sure I shall hear their cry; my anger will flare out and I shall kill you with the sword’. Persons with authority and power in our Church have molested, oppressed and been harsh with innocent children. Now that we know, and now that we have no excuse for failing to put in place the necessary safeguards, we must be committed to being those safe havens and sanctuaries should anyone be seeking rest, shelter and spiritual renewal. And to those too scarred by us, too angry with us, and too alienated from us, let’s remain humble, attentive and respectful of all they carry for our sins as a Church so long oblivious to the cry of the abused child.

Let’s thank those like Wendy Holder at Vespers at the Abbey:

Within the silence of this night
all now wait
patiently
for the dawn.