

## **Safeguarding Sunday**

### **Reflection on the Sunday readings by Fr Andrew Hamilton SJ**

In the Catholic Church, Safeguarding Sunday occurs at the end of National Child Protection Week. It complements the wider Australian commemoration but has a distinctive emphasis.

Safeguarding Sunday was affirmed by the members of the Church's recent Plenary Council, who in the decrees expressed "our profound sorrow that children and young people and vulnerable adults have been abused by clergy, religious and lay workers of the Catholic Church, and that religious leaders have failed to act sufficiently to prevent or respond to abuse". That focus naturally leads to the desire to make amends to the people who were abused and to ensure that in all the relationships with children within the Church they will be safe. The processes and protocols support that commitment to say "Never Again" to abuse.

National Child Protection Week looks more broadly at the need of children for protection. Its theme this year is "Every child in every community needs a fair go". It asks us to reflect on the support that children need to grow into confident and trusting adults, free from abuse of every kind. This perspective brings home to us the horror of what was done in the Catholic Church by setting it in the broader need for protection in the Australian community as a whole.

Our effectiveness in safeguarding children depends on changing deep-rooted attitudes, particularly to recognise our own sinfulness and failure to protect children and to be attentive to the vulnerable people in our Church community. The Mass readings focus on this.

We must also, however, make safe the environment in which they live. We do this by ensuring that they are listened to, are accompanied, that they are not vulnerable to predators and that protocols of conduct with children are strictly observed.

The Plenary Council "calls on all Catholics to commit to ensuring that Church environments are safe and respectful". The ways of keeping safe must be imprinted on hands and feet, on fences and in timetables, as well as on minds. For children, being given a fair go means that they will be safe in the company they keep and in the activities they do. For adults who accompany them, ensuring that they have a fair go means constant care to keep them safe.

The readings of this Sunday are about the attitudes needed in our Church if we are to keep children safe. The First Reading from the Book of Exodus 32:7-14 is part of a story of Israel's lack of seriousness and of God's patience. It stresses the need for constant self-reflection. God had freed the Israelites from slavery in Egypt and, through Moses, was shaping a community built on worship and awareness. While Moses is with God on the mountain, the people forget God and make a gold idol to worship. Moses then pleads with God not to cancel out the people for their fickleness. On Safeguarding Sunday, the story suggests how great is the sinfulness of a community that allowed the abuse of children to go

unaddressed for so long, how seriously we must take the protection of children and how firm God's commitment is to the community despite our sinfulness.

The Second Reading is from Paul's First Letter to Timothy 1:12-17. Paul entrusted Timothy with the care of the Christian community in Ephesus. The letter describes how a faithful life should be conducted in the community. In this passage, Paul stresses the seriousness of following Jesus by describing his own life. His calling took him from being a blasphemer driven by rage to the discovery of God's love in Jesus. He emphasises the importance of attending both to our sinfulness and to the even greater love and forgiveness of God. On Safeguarding Sunday, this reading urges us to keep before our eyes the horror and betrayal of sexual abuse and of our failure to notice and respond to it, while recognising that from repentance we will experience more deeply God's love. Paul's way is the opposite to moving on.

The Gospel reading from Luke 15:1-32 also looks at the way we see God and at the attitudes that should animate us as Christ's community. These attitudes are set against those of Jesus' critics who complain against his eating with sinners. The complaints indicate that the critics believe that they themselves are not sinners. Jesus tells stories that look at the question from God's point of view. The shepherd who goes into the scrub to search for a single lost sheep doesn't ask how the sheep came to be lost. Nor does the father, who longs for the return of a son who has wasted the hard-built security of his father and brother and now returns to find board and lodging, think about his son's guilt. Both shepherd and father simply rejoice in being reunited with what they had lost.

On Safeguarding Sunday, the Gospel reminds us how attentive we should be to people in need, including those who have separated themselves from the community. It indicates, too, the level of care we ought to have for children in the Church and the seriousness with which we should observe the safeguards. The Parable of the Prodigal Son also points to our special responsibility to seek out and welcome people who have been abused as children in the Church. Any financial cost we might bear as a Church in compensating them for the abuse they have suffered in our care is insignificant compared to the gain if they again find a home in Christ's church. The Gospel is about big-heartedness.