

2020 23RD SUNDAY

Last Monday Mr Terry Consedine, on behalf of Bishop Steve, gave a presentation to parishioners who are involved in ministries to children and to vulnerable elderly people on the topic of 'Safeguarding'. Safeguarding means working together within the Parish to create a culture where the safety of children and of vulnerable adults is paramount.

It would be easy for us to be defensive about this, given that, to the very best of our knowledge, those invited to minister on behalf of the Parish have been carefully selected and seem to be doing their utmost to uphold the standards of conduct expected of them. But we know that even one instance where children or elderly folk are sexually abused or bullied by someone working on behalf of the Parish is one instance too many.

We as Christians are the Body of Christ- the Body within which, and through which, Christ continues to act in our world. The world knows our claim and does right to pour scorn on us when we fall dramatically short of what we claim to be. Any evil within any Christian Church is to be detested for it eats away at our very identity of being the Body of Christ.

Christ is total love, total self-gifting, total compassion, total truth. To be authentic to our nature as the presence of Christ in the world we- the Catholic community of Gisborne- have to be like Christ- loving, self-gifting, compassionate and true to the Gospel.

Sin is like a virus in the church. It weakens us and we become less a Sacrament of Christ in the world.

Our Bishop Steve is adamant that sin within our communities must not be ignored. It must be faced and eradicated- just as we would eradicate deadly nightshade from our vege gardens. With this in mind the Bishop has established a Diocesan Complaints Office, led by Deacon Peter Richardson, at the Diocesan Centre in Hamilton, responsible for all complaints involving lay people. For complaints involving priests or religious, the first port of call should be the Bishop's Office in Hamilton.

In our first Reading today, Ezekiel pictures himself as a sentry guarding the people of Israel. The enemy lurking out in the darkness is sin. It is Ezekiel's responsibility to warn the people of sin's approach. If the prophet fails in this duty, he is seriously blameworthy.

The Reading reminds us to be awake to sin in our midst. If we are asleep to it, then we are in danger of being defeated by it.

The Gospel highlights our responsibility to protect the good name of the Church. If there are some in our midst who demean the holiness of the Church, then each one of us has a responsibility to challenge such people and remind them of the scandal they are creating.

However we have to be prudent and compassionate. Jesus' advice is to approach people who we judge are giving scandal quietly and discreetly- one to one. If we feel inadequate to this task then we are advised to enlist the help of family members or friends.

We must not be self-righteous. We must be governed by the example of Jesus who ate among tax-collectors and public sinners and who even allowed Judas, who He knew to be a traitor, to join Him at the Last Supper.

But ultimately we must have a concern for those who are powerless. And if they are being victimised we must act.

In the first place we must- as Jesus said- approach the offender and try to understand their perspective. Then it may well be appropriate – with all due humility, compassion and sensitivity- to challenge the person and to point out the damage they are doing and the need for a change of heart. We can do this with confidence- knowing that the Holy Spirit will overshadow us. As Jesus said in today's Gospel: "Where two or three meet in My Name, I shall be there with them."

However, as Jesus said, "If a person refuses to listen, report that person to the community." In our case that means to diocesan authorities.

We as a Parish have been challenged by Bishop Steve to ensure that the vesting room door should always be open, the blinds raised and at least two adults be in the room when the altar servers are vesting. We do this knowing that it is our shared responsibility to ensure that our Parish Church is a place children and vulnerable adults can come to and know that they are safe and valued. This is so important and so basic. Love, especially of our young and vulnerable elderly, is at the essence of who we are as a Christian community.