26th Sunday B

We have just heard two slightly comical pieces of bad behaviour. First in Moses day. God has given some power and authority to a group of his co-workers. Then they are jealous when they see other people sharing their privilege. Similarly with the apostle John and Jesus. It is not harmless and Jesus moves on to the terrible consequences that may follow

A mill-stone. That surely strikes a chord today. Anyone who is an obstacle to bring down one of these little ones who have faith… Almost daily more stories come to light of abuse of children and vulnerable. Sexual abuse works like an acid destroying peace, healthy growth, causing life-long agony. And all because someone whose task is to be a servant feels justified in using a child to satisfy his own lusts.

We deplore it. We are shocked. We are embarrassed when it is the clergy and leaders of our church. Now the outcry is growing: Don't bang on about how sorry you are; don't tell us how much it goes against your principles. Do something effective to stop it. Dead

Whether we are looking at such persons as Jimmy Saville, the seamy side of public life, of business and entertainment there is a common thread that needs to be recognised. Authority gives power and the ability to control. Celebrity generates an assumption of entitlement. Fame and a position of authority provide the opportunity. Celebrity and power go with the secular life of the world. They have no place in our church. The first step to honour and respect the righteous indignation is for us – all of us – to start saying this. Such assumptions must never find place in our church.

Jesus directs John's attention to the sole object and purpose of his life and ours. The service of Love. Make the whole preoccupation of your life the service of good growth. Be glad when a child can grow healthily, in a safe environment, respected. When a vulnerable person is sheltered from the potential harm of his disability, and his intrinsic goodness is recognised and encouraged. That alone is your job.

Abuse happens in families too. When it does occur, it is at root a failure to BE a family. That is a failure to reflect the family of Father-Son and Holy Spirit, of Jesus Mary and Joseph.

We clergy have a tarnished record. Thank God there is much more good in us than the evil of abuse now so much in the public eye. But even apart from actual abuse there is a widespread assumption of superiority that needs to be named and addressed. The titles claimed speak of that: Excellency, Monsignor, even Father has an air of being a little above the common run. It is now becoming clear that this self-importance is the fertile soil for the next step: If I have power I can control. If I am special in this way I can indulge my fancies. And so it can grow into most insidious damaging violence not just of body, but soul and spirit as well. Just look at the record.

We need to learn from you good families. Children need a climate of healthy authority. They test the limits. They are failed when there are not clear boundaries. In setting them your driving factor is love & concern for others rather than for yourself.. You husbands and wives have learned from each other, are in a gradual process of being shaped by each other. You cannot have, do, just what you like but that you accept because you love. You learn from your children as they learn from you. In the family of the church we clergy need to learn how to model our practice on yours for there is no other way to Christian living.
We have seen Jesus calmly telling John what his jealous outburst really means. We clergy need to hear him telling us of a deep flaw in our basic culture that we still ignore.