

THE NEED FOR A COMPASSIONATE CHURCH.

DO YOU THINK HE IS IN HELL?

(**The beginning of the argument for radical prophetic gospel compassion..... r.p.g.c.)**

We were sitting at the traffic lights on the Grosvenor Road and my Mum was chatting away. The rage was building in me, rage and guilt...it's not right to feel such anger at your Mum. The same Mum you love dearly and whom you have no doubt loves you totally and completely....and yet this inexplicable rage. Perhaps this is one of the most difficult aspects of it, that you cannot actually explain it, even to yourself. I tuned in more closely, what exactly was she saying, and then I realized she was talking about a young mother around the corner from us, and expressing surprise and indeed gentle disapproval that this woman had let her young son walk home from school. 'Parents these days'....aye and parents those days....and the rage crashed....and I glimpsed the color of it as I said deep in my heart, and where were you when Fr. McAuley was calling to take me off for the afternoon? Making bloody apple tarts for him and saying how wonderful it was that the priest was taking an interest in our Joseph. An interest indeed.... the rage gradually cooled...Then I looked over at her and smiled and loved her and reminded myself again she could never have known....

I consider it an honor to be here today. Maybe a dark honor in that to some degree I am here because of my story and my story is not neat. I recently had a similar dark honor when I spent ninety minutes sitting beside the Pope. It was both, both dark and an honor. It was dark because the eight of us that had been invited to meet the Holy Father shared one thing in common and that was the ticket in, a ticket of pain. Though I would want to be equally clear it was indeed an honor. It was an honor not just because I was in the presence of the Pope, the Head of this Church I love, but also because it was this particular Pope. Francis is a beautiful Shepherd, and in addition to this, I

left this meeting in no doubt that I was in the presence of one who knows Jesus. I mention this for a particular reason in relation to our work here today which I will return to.

My story is a messy story and my story still hurts, sometimes. Loads of times it doesn't hurt and I am happy not to be defined by events that happened nearly forty years ago and life is good and rich with many interests and is never boring and my life is knitted together by a blanket of love: of family and friends, old and new, and at the core is Jesus who needs no explanation and who constantly responds fittingly.

Yet of course it should never have happened we were small children and what happened did lasting damage.

As you can see I carry it.

Obvious enough, my mess,

what's yours?

So it's good to be here. It's good to be reflecting on such important issues with people like yourselves so dedicated and committed in this area.

I want to address two issues today

first of all I want to speak briefly about what we might call the abuse itself, and how well do we understand it, and then if I may, I want to comment on our response to it.

The word for me that provides the backdrop to this discussion is gentleness. Gentleness is the forerunner to compassion.

Without gentleness there will be no compassion and without compassion not only will there be no healing but worse still there will be further damage done.

So let us proceed with gentleness so that compassion can take root and then the healing, the deep healing that only the Lord can give may seep in.

HOW WELL DO WE UNDERSTAND WHAT HAPPENS?

Surely at this stage we have a good idea about what happens when a child or vulnerable adult is abused? One would think that given all that we have been through we would have things in a manageable state. In fact we do. Much excellent work has been done but there is quite a gap between the knowledge and understanding of those, and I mean yourselves, who are dedicated to this special work and the general public.

I am one of the last people to bash the media for I believe for the most part they do us a great service. Indeed they have done us a great service in the area of good quality investigative journalism. However I think the value of the work has been primarily in investigating, uncovering and bringing to light. In fairness the good work doesn't stop there because there has some excellent work in the area of accountability.

So where is the gap? I see the gap manifest itself in two ways:

there is the gap between the reflective, professional educated realm and the public square,

and there is the gap between the what, who, where and when of the topic to the great neglect of the why of the topic.

The gap between the insider knowledge and understanding, and general awareness is exacerbated by the fact that the natural anger and rage in the public square gives little room or appetite for the more reflective questions.

Questions such as why did this happen or more challenging but more accurately why does this happen?

Of course the questions of who did it? What did they do? When? Where? will always be important questions. In the interests of basic justice such questions

have to be asked, but until we begin to seriously grapple with the why question then we will continue to struggle with real compassion.

I think it takes great courage to ask this question, the why question in a climate of rage. Let's make no mistake, this is righteous rage but we cannot stay enraged forever. Not only is it brave to ask the why question when most are shouting who, when, what and where, it has in my view become imperative that we do so.

What we are speaking of here is not only courageous leadership but heroic leadership. Hand on hearts where are we on the journey from a Church that failed victims, that in being bedeviled, and I use the word advisedly, bedeviled by clericalism and misogyny, and failed to hear the cry of Yahweh's poor..... to a Church that is gospel compassion itself. Where are we on this journey from that old church to the new one we are building together. My friends Reform is not a bad word. To call for reform is not treachery but in fact a cry of love.

I would like to say to this conference today and I do so with huge respect and admiration, there is the psychological empathy and therapeutic accompaniment that we find on the psychotherapist's couch which of course are of immeasurable value but today I am speaking of something different.

I am speaking of a journey well begun, though far from completed, if it could ever be completed, it is the journey to

a radical prophetic gospel compassion.

I believe this is a huge challenge. When we get serious about this we get serious about the why of abuse? Why does it happen? Why is it happening? And sadly why will it happen? Once we get in here we are in the thick of it. We are being prophetic and radical enough to be actively Christlike.

Jesus was so radical,

so searingly revolutionary as to be counter cultural

and when we start imitating this

then we are actively building the compassionate Church that is crying out from the mess of abuse.

Think of it like this: what happened was so immoral and so sinful, both the original actions and our later retarded response to it, as to literally fly in the face of God.

Given the love Jesus had for the broken, the vulnerable, the cast aside one can imagine him weep at the abuse of little children and vulnerable adults.

Now I would argue that there are many strands necessary in our response, and many here have done Trojan work in the same, but my contention is that the ultimate response lies in

radical prophetic gospel compassion,

and that where this is absent, healing remains incomplete and new

abuse possible and indeed likely.

With this

radical prophetic gospel compassion

comes the wisdom and courage for the hard questions:

why did this happen? Is he a monster? Is it something in him? Was he born like that? Did something happen to him that made him like that?

It's good to look at our answers and to check that they are not designed to suit us, as it were to let us off the hook. For example:

It happened because he is an evil monster could be a convenient but ultimately a very lazy answer on our part. If he is a monster he is not one of us and we do not need to spend too much time on the evil in him. However when we realize he is a son, brother, father, husband and that there is a story, a human story that he is part of, then it is no longer neat.

There is no excuse in any of this, because of course there is no excuse.

However in never excusing

we must constantly seek to understand and perhaps explain even to ourselves at least partially.

There is nothing to be gained by attempting to excuse but there is a lot to be gained by seeking to understand.

One question leads to another and we lose the black and white and we discover grey and it doesn't suit.

Ignorance facilitates certainty, of which there is often little, and true compassion,

the radical gospel prophetic compassion

we are called to, suffers. It is either blocked or dissipated.

With this particular brand of compassion we are speaking of this morning, essentially the compassion of Christ, come other questions? What about the terms we use?

What about the words used to describe the abuse? Very often these are words not used by those who suffered but by others who think they understand. Words like horrific, disgusting, terrifying. These are adult words used from a distance. Very often the more accurate words are embarrassment, bewilderment and awkward.

Go gently with labels including 'survivor'.

Without meaning to they can patronize.

There is a sense that we have survived and in another sense we are not quite sure. And today it may not feel like survival at all. Anyway no matter how well intentioned it is it's another label. Labels tend to shut us down or shut us up.

And what about the word 'victim'? And for the primary victim how many secondary and tertiary victims, and of these are they found in the family of the victim or in the family of both victim and perpetrator?

When I think of the great lump of toxic waste he dumped into the sea of my young life I realize the pollution of it leaked into not just my family but his as well. He too had a mother. She too grieved. What must have it been like to see your only son, a priest, locked up in prison for abusing little children, knowing that not only would he not celebrate your funeral Mass but he would not be at it. Yes we must never take the focus of the violated child, the primary damaged, but there is no monopoly on victimhood.

What of words like closure or even more contentious the word forgiveness?

Both society and perhaps the world of psychology may well urge seeking closure but if we are serious about being a compassionate church after the model aforementioned namely rooted

in radical prophetic gospel compassion

then we have to have the courage to put the word forgiveness on the table. We cannot and should not, hector people and there is no one size fits all.

Nevertheless I unapologetically

whilst being continually mindful of the need for gentleness in all this

have to say that it is in the ongoing process of forgiving that true peace comes dropping slowly.

Just in the same way that

the damage done is unique

so too is the impact

so too is the healing

so too is the recovery.

I arrived home one evening. We did not know then that you would be gone to Heaven in a few months and you were very quiet and I watched you. 'Do you see where he has died?' 'Yea I saw that,' I replied. More silence. Unusual for

both of us. We had for a good while now reached a beautiful place. There was no elephant in the room. Whilst it did not destroy either our glitzy razzmatazz happiness often laughing together and sometimes at each other nor did it impinge on our deeper joy. It was six months since you had mentioned it, on that occasion remarking whatever about forgiving him it was much more difficult to forgive the Bishop who knew about his abuse of children and put him into our parish. Yet here we were in the face of his death in an old silence. 'Tell me what you are thinking Ma'.... 'I've been wondering a few times this evening, do you think he is in hell?' 'What?' 'Do you think he is in hell?'

PERHAPS A WORD ON OUR RESPONSE

Our priority is to make our diocese, our church a safer place. What else could be our priority?

Can we say the Catholic Church is now a safer place? I think thanks be to God given the gospel work that you are engaged in, the answer to this question is yes.

However what about this statement?

‘ it will never happen again.’

This statement makes me very uncomfortable even if it comes from a Bishop, maybe especially if it comes from a Bishop.

Whilst I would not for a moment doubt the intention nor the integrity behind such a statement, I have no choice but to say,

it betrays both a naiveté and unfortunately a misunderstanding of the core issue.

The abuse of children is not exclusively a clerical problem nor is it exclusively a Catholic problem. Sadly in ministry I am meeting the uncle who has abused his niece, the grandfather who has destroyed his little grandson and oftentimes the babysitter who has betrayed a core trust. Sadly the abuse of children is in our society. It is of course appropriate that it is seen as a dreadful crime but I

wonder are there aspects of how we respond that might actually make it more difficult for those who have suffered?

Sensationalism rarely helps the broken. Headlines of ‘paedo - monster’ do not contribute to the peace of those who have suffered. After my Late Late interview I received correspondence from around the country from people of all ages and backgrounds and they had one thing in common: they had not, and have no intention of, reporting what happened to them.

Once again we must ask why? This question, the why question is the core and the faithful question once we move into the realm of radical prophetic gospel compassion (rpgc)

Quite a preponderance of those who wrote said that the response of society and of the authorities was too much. They all wanted an end to the abuse and to its legacy. They wanted the abuser stopped. When it came to punishment reactions varied greatly, including in some instances an acknowledgement that their resolution not to report was directly linked to their unwillingness to see the abuser punished.

Statements that arise from adopting rpgc might include:

There is no monopoly on victimhood

The toxic nature of abuse ripples out and it lingers for years

Those who have abused whether before during or after punishment need compassion and support

In the case of a priest, once he has been removed permanently from contact from children and after the civil penalty has been paid, should he never celebrate Eucharist again, including privately?

Should he be stripped of priesthood? And of membership of his order, or diocese?

Is monitoring best served in this scenario? Is the victim best served?

Is the pain of abuse eased by further injustice?

For example does the longer the sentence, the greater the punishment enhance the peace of the wounded?

‘The Pope has’nt done enough!’ The prophetic compassionate question might be: ‘what would constitute enough?’

For example when Minister Zapone ambushed the Pope and pressed the issue about further payments from religious orders two questions arise:

Have the major superiors of today the moral right to use the assets of the order often earned for another use, namely school or hospital, for the compensation of those wronged by the actions of the few?

Should I as an elderly Sister of Mercy or Christian Brother in increasing need of nursing care be worried as to whether the Congregation’s resources will be sufficient for these demands?

By way of conclusion if I was to highlight

one thing that would assist us in a move towards a more compassionate church it would be how we deal with the topic of sexuality.

More than in any other area I think it is in the area of sexuality that we as Church have made the greatest mess.

I often ask myself how did we as a Church manage to perfect the preaching of fear when in fact what we have to offer is the beautiful message of love.

This leads very quickly to a related question:

In the context of Church, specifically in the context of Catholicism, when did we hear sex spoken of as beautiful, as special, as a great gift from God.

Did we not often hear of it spoken amidst finger wagging, tut tutting and thou shalt not.

If we understood from our earliest days that we are sexual beings and that this is beautiful and in fact

that our sexuality is our share in the divine

that we have something called sex drive

and something called sexual orientation

and that both these must be befriended and celebrated

then maybe we might be less screwed up.

We need a major rethink as to how we present sexuality.

This has a bearing on how we operate at every level in our faith community, our church:

from the earliest days in school, to our Catholic Teacher Training Colleges.

This rethink would also have something to say about how we present the topic in seminaries.

For example which is the most important question, are you straight or gay? Or can you live celibacy healthily?

And so my lovely Mum Bridie said to me that night, 'Do you think he is in Hell?' I smiled, 'No Ma, I don't think he is in Hell, at least I hope he's not in Hell and don't you be thinking like that!' More silence, and more silence... 'tell me Ma what is going on in your head?' 'Well if he is not in Hell, then God help him if I meet him in Heaven!

Thanks.