

*'Take care that you do not despise one of these little ones; for, I tell you, in heaven their angels continually see the face of my Father in heaven. What do you think? If a shepherd has a hundred sheep, and one of them has gone astray, does he not leave the ninety-nine on the mountains and go in search of the one that went astray? And if he finds it, truly I tell you, he rejoices over it more than over the ninety-nine that never went astray. So it is not the will of your Father in heaven that one of these little ones should be lost. 'If another member of the church sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone. If the member listens to you, you have regained that one. But if you are not listened to, take one or two others along with you, so that every word may be confirmed by the evidence of two or three witnesses. If the member refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if the offender refuses to listen even to the church, let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax-collector. Truly I tell you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven. Again, truly I tell you, if two of you agree on earth about anything you ask, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven. For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.'*

Little ones are of great value to God. When the disciples asked Jesus who would be the greatest in his kingdom, he called a child to stand in the middle of them and told his hulking great adult friends to change and become humble like children. He told them that anyone who welcomed such a little child was welcoming him.

Then Jesus gave a stern warning: woe to anyone who causes a little one to stumble! He threatened with dire consequences anyone who would lead astray such vulnerable children.

Our Gospel reading for today begins with Jesus explaining how precious children are to God by telling this parable of the devoted shepherd; the story tells us nothing about the sheep that was lost, or why it was lost, because it is about the loving care of the shepherd who searches and then rejoices when he finds it. Jesus goes on to give instructions about restoring relationships in the community of believers. If someone has done wrong, this is a structure of reconciliation to follow- always with the hopeful intention of putting things right.

If the wrongdoer is unrepentant, or unwilling to admit they have done wrong, then the only option may be to let them go- to ask them to leave.

This is a serious step, and Jesus reassures us that he is present when we pray about such things, to guide and help us to make such a difficult decision.

As the theologian Brendan Byrne has written,

*"It is hardly necessary to dwell upon the painful actuality that texts such as this have acquired in recent years in the context of the sexual abuse scandals that have swept the church- both in regard to actual abuse of 'little ones' and failure on the part of administrators to take effective measures to prevent it."*

The National Anglican Church in Australia and our own Diocese have put structures in place in a sincere and essential attempt to prevent the abuse of children and any vulnerable people. Everyone who has any role in a parish or church entity- all office-bearers, volunteers, paid staff and clergy- must attend Church Safe training, obtain a police clearance, and fill in volunteers' forms as appropriate.

In addition, all licensed Anglican clergy are required to undertake regular spiritual direction and clinical supervision.

The Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse made such recommendations, and our Diocese has been pro-active in setting up the required structures.

It is now law that clergy must report to the police if any incident of child sexual abuse is revealed to them: no longer can 'the seal of the confessional' prohibit a priest from reporting.

In the Diocese of Perth this has been the case for some years. Protecting children and all who are vulnerable is a priority for us all, as it is for our Devoted Shepherd.

Too many people have been hurt by those who have lost sight of their responsibility to care for those who are the most vulnerable and the least powerful. Too many lives have been damaged, and too many times those who could have stopped it turned away. Now it is up to every one of us to be vigilant in our care for the little ones.

In our reading from the letter to the Romans we heard Paul giving instructions that Christians should always obey the authorities and the law of the land. Previously he had been saying that Christians should live lives that are different to those of the rest of society- so how does that work?

The church in Rome was at the centre of the Roman Empire, and the Emperor was worshipped as a god. At the time this letter was written Nero was Caesar; and throughout his letter Paul had been telling his readers they were members of the household of the Lord Jesus, not of the Lord Caesar.

Roman emperors kept the peace using violence, judgement, fear, and the sword; the Christian community was to offer welcome, generosity, forgiveness, and true peace. Paul counsels them to be careful and respectful of the state while recognising they belonged to another Lord, Jesus Christ.

He goes on to cite the commandments against adultery, murder, theft, and jealousy, knowing that the Christians in Rome are fully aware that Nero's household was based on all those sins.

The law of love, the commandment to love your neighbour as you love yourself, trumps and passes judgement on all imperial law.

What does this mean for Christians today? What would you do if you were living in a country where the police force was corrupt, where government officials were corrupt, where people who spoke up were punished or simply disappeared?

Do you think there is a place for non-violent civil disobedience and protest?

There are many places in our world today where not only children are vulnerable, but anyone can be a target for violence and abuse- because of skin colour, ethnic origin, religion, or political views.

People in Hong Kong, Russia, Myanmar, East Timor, South Sudan, Syria, the United States, and many other countries experience ongoing violence, oppression, and discrimination. First Nations People in our own country still have shorter life expectancies, poorer health and educational outcomes and higher rates of imprisonment than other Australians.

Humanity has not learnt the law of love- that is clear. Just think how different the world would be if every single person took that simple little rule to heart, and we really did try to love others as we love ourselves. Our responsibility then is to be the person, the community, that lives the law of love. Every decision we make, every word we speak, every relationship we engage in, all encompassed by the law of love.

This might seem an impossibly high standard for us mere mortals, but Jesus has promised to be with us, God our Devoted Shepherd will bring us back if we get lost, and the Spirit of love prays with us and through us- we are never left alone to struggle by ourselves.

The Lord be with you.