

St. Aidan's West Epping, 10th March 2019

“THE TEMPTATIONS OF POWER”

(Deuteronomy 26:1-11; Psalm 91; Romans 10:4-13; Luke 4:1-15)

Cardinal George Pell. There's been a huge amount of discussion and debate about him, and especially about the verdict in the case of his alleged child abuse. Twelve ordinary Australians heard the evidence in court. They were undoubtedly warned against allowing prejudice to influence their decision. And they concluded that George Pell was beyond reasonable doubt guilty of child abuse.

On my limited knowledge of the circumstances, I was surprised by the verdict. However under our Australian system of justice I have to accept this decision, although there will no doubt be an appeal. There are many who are seeking to raise doubts about the decision, while others are claiming to have discovered more examples of his alleged child abuse. And there is certainly plenty of evidence that Cardinal Pell was not always helpful or sympathetic to many who came to him because they had suffered abuse from Catholic priests.

Regardless of any questions, I am deeply saddened by all this. I am sad that a significant leader of the wider church has been condemned of such a terrible crime. I am sad that victims have had so much trouble getting heard, both as children and as adults. I am sad that so many young people have had lives impacted for evil by church leaders acting absolutely contrary to their calling. I am sad that the message of the Gospel has been undermined by these acts.

George Pell will be given a tough time in prison, both because of his former position and his reputation, as well as the disgust so often expressed towards child abusers. Unless he makes a confession, which I don't imagine will happen, I don't think we will ever know for sure about the case. The justice system tries to make things as sure as possible, but it is certainly not perfect or mistake-proof.

I hope he will be well-supported in jail. It is right to pray for him, rather than to disown him: to pray that he will acknowledge and repent of whatever wrongs he has done, that he will be open to God's grace and wisdom, and that he will be protected from harm. Remember that Jesus was happy to mix with and to minister to those seen as the lowest of the low. Gracious prayer for child abusers, terrible though their crimes are, is a godly thing.

And it is important to pray for the Pope and the whole Roman Catholic Church, as well as the Anglican and other churches, as well as other organizations and even families where child abuse has been a reality. Pray also for victims, that they will receive the acceptance and understanding and support they need: indeed that they will be helped towards genuine healing. May the churches and other organizations caught up in these terrible realities take the issue seriously, acknowledge their failings, deal rightly with victims, and take real steps to ensure that it stops.

Now why am I talking about child abuse when nothing in our readings makes any reference to this unpleasant subject? Because child abuse is certainly a very distorted expression of sexuality, but more than anything else it is an abuse of power. And our Gospel is very much about the use and misuse of power by one who is a messenger of God.

Power gives people all sorts of opportunities to do good or evil. There are plenty of examples in the news every day. Those who have power face a variety of temptations. And so did Jesus.

Jesus had been baptized, acknowledged by God as his beloved Son, and commissioned for his ministry. But now he is led by the Spirit into the wilderness for forty days. His temptations are no coincidence: God knows that Satan must test him out as he considers how he will approach his ministry. How will Jesus use his power?

“If you are the Son of God, you shouldn't be starving”, says the devil. “Turn these stones into bread. You've got to look after yourself.” But Jesus quotes Moses in the book of Deuteronomy. “Bread is not the most important thing if we are going to live real lives.” Jesus is going to put God's agenda first, not his own felt needs.

“Even if you are the Son of God, you are still very limited in power”, says the devil. “You know perfectly well how much power I have been given in this world. People constantly go my way, not God’s way. You really need the power I have to offer. Worship me, and it will be yours.” Half-truths often work better than blatant lies: the power that the devil has in this world is taken by him, not given to him. True power is not his to give, and worshipping the devil will of course put Jesus under the power of the devil. Jesus once again responds with words of Moses: “Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.” Jesus will not take short cuts to power. He will serve God, not his own agenda, certainly not the Evil One.

“Throw yourself off the pinnacle of the temple”, says the devil. “Impress people! And show that you really trust God: get him to rescue you and show his faithfulness. Isn’t that what Psalm 91 says?” Oh yes, the devil can quote scripture! But he distorts the message, as people over the centuries have always done when they have their own agenda. For this Psalm is about the person who truly trusts the Lord: the person who therefore truly seeks to obey and serve him. It is not meant to give an excuse for people to try out God’s power, to put the Lord to the test.

And so again Jesus quotes Moses who is warning people not to put the Lord to the test. Jesus is there to serve God, not to try to manipulate or use him. I am reminded of the German poet Heinrich Heine who is claimed to have said on his deathbed: “God will forgive me. That’s his business. That’s his job.” That’s really putting God to the test: presuming on him, not really trusting him at all.

Ultimate power belongs to God. He shares that power with us in this world. He appointed us humans in charge of the world: but of course we have responsibilities given by him to us. We are to care for his world, to share its bounty, to make use of its resources, but not to abuse it. Adam was given power, but he wasn’t satisfied with the power and freedom he had, and he sought power which was not for him: as a result he lost much of the power he had, and the created world started resisting human power.

Similarly in the wilderness, the Israelites resisted the power of God. They failed to trust God for the food he would provide. They sought a God they could see as they made the golden calf. They complained and tried to twist God’s purposes to their purposes.

Adam went Satan’s way. The Israelites went Satan’s way. But Jesus rejected the offers of Satan; he resisted the temptations presented to him in the wilderness. Yes, he had power, but he would use that power in God’s service, and in the sacrificial service of humans like us.

Jesus knew the message of scripture and followed its message. As he began his public ministry, he was clear that he would use his power to serve. He would seek to meet the real needs of people, and not his own wants and desires. He would teach people the way of God, and not put himself under the thumb of the devil. His miracles would not be empty displays, but acts of compassion for people in need, acts that pointed people to the truth and the love of God.

Power can be used for good or for evil. Child abuse, or abuse of anyone, is indeed an evil use of that power. Ministers of the church have power and influence: but that very word “minister” is a reminder of the purpose of their power. Ministers are to **serve**: not to lord it over people, certainly not to abuse. So are teachers, employers, parents, older relations, grandparents, coaches and leaders, and all who have any degree of power over others.

We are all called to put God first: to resist the temptation to go the way of the devil. And we are called to show the love and goodness of God in our lives: to serve and to humbly love others. That’s what Jesus determined to do. And as we follow him, we are to serve and love others, as Jesus did, and as Jesus calls us to do. Amen.

Paul Weaver