

TRINITY SUNDAY 2015

It is unusual for a congregation to erupt with applause after listening to a Sunday homily but that is what exactly happened at St Columba's Parish, Ballarat North on Trinity Sunday. Parishioner Kate Lawry felt compelled to share Barry Ryan's heartfelt words with the Diocese.

Today's feast of the Trinity is about unity and diversity: God is three in one; we are, all of us, in God; God is in us. This feast is about the interweaving of the life that is God and the life of God that is in us and that binds us together with one another and with the whole of creation. It is about the interweaving of your story, my story and the story of the whole church.

It is not easy to celebrate this feast of the unity in God and in creation as we become more and more aware that so many of our children have been betrayed and that we have failed to protect them from unspeakable harm, harm perpetrated by those whom they trusted as representing the institutional church. The events of the past two weeks relating to the Royal Commission into institutional responses to child sexual abuse have been heart wrenching.

Fifty-three years ago, Pope John XXIII convened the Second Vatican Council because the Church was out of touch with the world at large. He drew attention to the Church's failure to save six million Jews from the gas chambers of the Nazis in World War II. It was noted in the aftermath of the war that the holocaust took place in the heart of Christendom. How could it be that the Jews were so isolated? What hidden forces in Church people could have allowed this to happen? What prejudices had led to such blindness?

From the beginning of our Christian history, there was tension between Jews and Christians. There was further tension in the Middle Ages when the Church forbade the making of interest from lending money and Jews became the money lenders: ironically, they provided a service and yet were hated for it. Until very recently, we prayed on Good Friday for "the perfidious Jews". Since Vatican II, there has been an awakening, leading to dialogue, the beginnings of a new understanding and reconciliation between Christians and Jews.

The Royal Commission has now brought to our attention another way in which the Church has been seriously out of touch. Over many decades, our structures were such that the shameful abuse of children could happen and continue to happen. While most of us had no idea of what was going on in our midst (and I include myself in that), we now have a shared responsibility to turn things around so that such tragedy can never recur. It has taken the structures and systems of our secular society to make us face up to the impact of the abuse and the blindness that hindered appropriate responses.

We need to claim once more the spirit of Vatican II. Change is needed and change can only happen if we address with some urgency the church structures and systems that fail to support the gospel message. And the gospel message is one of abiding and all-embracing love. First, we must listen-and do our best to hear. We must be attentive to what is happening and be attentive to the gospel so that you and I and all the baptised are in tune with who we claim to be.

The gospel we have just heard has the risen Jesus meeting his male disciples on a mountain in Galilee. He tells them to go and make disciples and to baptise in the name of the Triune God, the God of all-embracing love. He promises to be with them always. When we read this gospel passage in isolation, we can easily

fail to notice that the men disciples have been directed to this mountain by the women disciples who had already encountered the resurrected Jesus on the open road. The tragedy of our church is that we have taken this story out of context and emphasised only the mountain top. We have inherited male-centred pyramidal structures while forgetting to honour within our structures the missionary and leadership roles of the women on the open road, those who first heard and communicated the message of the resurrection of Jesus.

While we continue to reserve to men so many of the key decision-making roles within the Church, then we cannot expect our church to change in any substantial way. I am convinced that this means looking at the place of women's ordination to the priesthood and to the episcopacy. In the Royal Commission, Bishop Bird was asked his opinion on women's ordination, and he answered that there is no reason in Scripture to hold the position that is in place today. Change is a task for all the members of the church. We might begin by discussing what baptism means for us. We might look again at the call to mission that is inherent in our baptism.

We might consider forming groups to discuss our hopes and dreams, to learn about the sources of our faith and to claim the courage to speak out. Maybe we need to be like the early Christians and organise little gatherings in our homes. Let us listen to one another. Let us hear what others have to say. Let us take hold of this time as a grace-filled moment in our lives as Church, painful as it is, and seize the impetus for life-affirming change that might help us to be who we are, disciples who have been caught up into the life of the Triune God.

Fr Barry Ryan