

Break the Silence

Last November as part of the international 16 Days of Activism campaign which includes White Ribbon Day, Revd Ann Drummond, a volunteer with the House of Sarah in Suva, Fiji offered the following sermon at Holy Trinity Anglican Cathedral in Suva and at St Andrew's Presbyterian Church in Suva. The following sermon is a timely reminder to us all that everyday should be White Ribbon Day and that our actions should reflect our year long commitment and support of women and children who suffer violence.



I am aware that I write this as a white western woman who has only been in Fiji for just over a year so I am aware that I am an outsider to Fijian culture and traditions. But in speaking out on this Break the Silence Sunday I take as my model the Canaanite or Syro-Phoenician woman who because of her passion to have her daughter healed challenged Jesus' thinking and actions. My passion is to end violence against women and I believe the Church has an important role in doing that so I am prepared to challenge current thinking in the hope and prayer that Churches like Jesus will reflect on this issue and like him have the courage

to change their minds and actions and become more involved in this important issue - so please read it in that spirit.

Revd Ann Drummond

The reading from Luke's gospel tells us the very familiar story of the 'good Samaritan' This morning nominated by the Diocese as 'Break the Silence' Sunday we challenge the actions of the priest and the Levite who chose to cross the road and pass by the victim of violence on the other side of the road.

One can speculate and perhaps even justify why they chose that course of action but today it is time to challenge them both to rethink their decision and to cross back and render aid to of victim of violence. The priest and the Levite represented the religious establishment of Jesus' day and the Samaritan represented the outsider because the Samaritans did not follow the all Jewish religious practices. So Jesus was highlighting the hypocrisy of the religious community who looked down with disdain on outsiders like the Samaritan.

As communities of faith throughout history we have had a tendency to think that we are better than those outsiders who do not believe as we do. And like the priest and the Levite when it comes to assisting victims of violence we have often passed by on the other side. Here in Fiji with a few individual exceptions (you can name those you are aware of such as the Salvation Army and the House of Sarah) churches have often been reluctant when it comes to assisting the victims of domestic violence within our families, our churches and our communities and we have also remained silent about the injustice being perpetrated. We have tended to see it as

not our problem. We have left it to the 'good Samaritans' outside the Church such as the Fiji Women's Crisis Centre, Fiji Women Rights Movement, the hospitals and medical profession, the police, and the Social Welfare Department of Government to stop and minister to the victims of domestic violence, to tend to their wounds, to find a safe place for them to stay and to pay the cost in both time, effort and money.

But the time has come for local congregations and for national churches to cross the road and to give of their time and resources to aid victims of violence within our churches and local communities. Statistics here in Fiji according to the Fiji Women's Crisis Centre indicated that 64% of women experience physical and/or sexual violence at the hand of someone who claims to love them. That means that there are women sitting in the pews of all churches that have or are experiencing violence in their lives. Those people who believe that good Christian men do not beat their wives and partners have their head in the sand because the fact is that they do and there will be others who argue that women also hit men and yes they do but statistics indicate 97% of violence within families is perpetrated by men against women and children which is why the literature in this area (and in this sermon) refers to men as the perpetrators of violence and the women and children as the victim/survivors.

There would not be many of us sitting here this morning who would not know either a victim/survivor and/or a perpetrator of family violence within our network of family, friends and colleagues but too often we are embarrassed or afraid to speak about the subject in case we are seen to be taking sides in a family or personal conflict. But the word to us from the Galatians 6 this morning is that we should not stand by when we know wrongdoing is happening. Our God is a God who lifts up the victim and restores them to wholeness and offers to them

life and life in abundance and as disciples of that God we are given that responsibility also.

So what would it mean for us to cross the road to assist the victim of violence? It would mean several things. First it would be ensuring that we assist the victim, the good Samaritan bound up the wounds, poured oil and wine on them and put the victim on his donkey took him to the inn and paid for his care – for victims of domestic violence today it might mean that we have to assist them get to the hospital, help look after their children, find them safe alternative accommodation, assist them financially, refer them to the police, to counselling, go with them if they have to attend court. Practical, helpful supportive assistance is what is initially needed – communities of faith are good at providing this and your support can mean a great deal to women who are hurt, demoralised and fearful.

It also means that the church should be a safe place for women to come and tell their story. They should not be sent home and told to pray more, submit more or turn the other cheek. The Church should support them in the sure knowledge that it is not the will of God that they or their children should live with constant violence and intimidation in their lives. The church should support their choices and not condemn them should they decided to separate or divorce. It should not punish them for having the courage to claim Jesus' promise of life and life in abundance by asking them to remain in violent relationships or to suggest when they separate that they not take the Eucharist or ask them to step down from positions within the church and church organisations. By talking with and listen to women who have been victim/survivors local congregations will soon learn services are needed and the attitudes which need to change to help them on their journey to wholeness.

But in our story we must go one step further than the Good Samaritan – we must do something to prevent the next person who takes the road from Jerusalem to Jericho from becoming a victim of violence. We must do something about the perpetrators of violence. Gus Kaufman a man who has worked with perpetrators of violence for the last twenty years says from his experience men hit their partners for a number of reasons but the two main reasons are – first that it works, and the second is that they get away with it. The Church as well as the community has a responsibility to ensure that violence no longer works and that they no longer get away with it - we must call them to account; the Church must say loud and clear that violence is not acceptable behaviour. That it is a sin for a man to hit or beat his wife or partner. We must have the courage to call him to repentance and the courage to walk with him on his journey to wholeness. All those who work with perpetrators say there is no such thing as instant change, that repentance requires more than a one off 'I'm sorry – I'll never do it again' but an ongoing change in behaviour, an ongoing journey towards changed attitude and actions. Encouraging reconciliation after an immediate verbal repentance or apology is often to put both the woman and the children at risk; – the proof of true repentance is in the ongoing change of both attitude and behaviour over months and years. While the courts hold the perpetrator to account if the violence is reported no one yet in either the sacred or the secular communities in Fiji has had the courage or the resources to effectively provide a service which will challenge their behaviour and walk along side these men as they reclaim living without resorting to violence to either vent their frustrations or get their own way.

The vision of the new creation we read in Isaiah where there will be nothing harmful or evil remains just that - a vision - unless we as people of faith have the courage to work towards it becoming a reality.

It means that as Christians we must involve ourselves in the provision of service even if it just begins with being knowledgeable of the secular services available to refer people to. But the most important task unique to the church is to not allow the Bible to be used to support the inequality of women. We must correct the misinterpretations of passages which have been used for centuries to keep women submissive and unequal. We must preach that we are all both male and female created in the image of God; that Adam as well as Eve disobeyed God and that the death of Jesus was for the liberation of both women and men; that marriage is an equal partnership between a man and a woman; that Jesus did not condemn women to live in a violent marriage and that the one who raises the fist is the one who has broken the marriage vow.

Culture, tradition and the roles we play help us live in community with one another but they are manmade structures and they can and do change. Some of our cultural traditions are good and we want to hold on to those but others only advantage the status quo and entrench the power of the powerful and those need to be challenged in the light of the Gospel. God does not look at our culture and traditions – God does not care if we are Fijians or Australians, Tongans or Russians – God cares that we love our neighbours and work for justice in our family and community life. Nor does God look at our roles or status it matters not whether we female or male whether we are the Archbishop or the cleaner, the President or the security man, a company Chief Executive or a single mother. God looks only at the heart and the words and actions that flow from our hearts; our culturally assigned roles should never limit us as Disciples of Christ. As Christians our model is Jesus both his compassion and his willingness to

challenge the religious and cultural traditions of his time; and also the words and spirit of Paul in Galatians that “there is no difference between Jews and Gentiles, between slaves and free people, between men and women for we are all one in union with Christ Jesus” (Galatians 3:28) reflects the truth of our equality not only in discipleship but also our equality in family and community life.

That is the gift that the Christian community has to give to a world in which inequality and violence are all too common within both our families and our world community. But if we are faithful to our responsibilities as disciples of Jesus we will move towards the vision of Isaiah where the lion will lie down with the lamb, where men will not use violence against women and children and nations will not use violence against their own people or their neighbours and on this sacred planet there will be nothing harmful or evil and no longer a need for a ‘Break the Silence’ Sunday.

‘Break the Silence’ Sunday Readings and Sermon suggestion theme: Isaiah 65: 17-25; Psalm 55:1-8 12-14, 20-22; Galatians 6:1-10; Luke 10:29-37, ‘Time to cross back to the other side of the road’ – Luke 10:29-37