

11.30 Mass

3rd Sunday of Lent

LOUDfence

You would rightly be disturbed if I turned up at your house, barged my way in and then basically took over. Sprawl myself all over your sofa, grab the TV remote and switch the channel that you had been watching.

When we are in other people's homes, we respect the homeowner's wishes.

It applies elsewhere. When I was very young my parents took me to the swimming baths to learn to swim. On the side of the pool were a series of posters with images and words. No running, no smoking, no eating, no bombing, I always thought was a bit alarming and no petting, I just found confusing... why would I bring my cat to the swimming baths?

But the rules were clear, when you are in the swimming baths, this is how you behave.

I share all that because our readings are all about our behaviour in God's House, in his presence. Moral behaviour in God's eyes is not an entrance requirement. Behave like this and you are welcome, you can enter. No, we are always in God's House, in His presence and this is how we behave. People are always welcome; behaviour is not always welcome and may be totally unacceptable and so removed.

In our first reading we listen to the 10 Commandments given to Moses. Our Jewish sisters and brothers refer to them as the 10 Words, and perhaps it is better we do too. God tells His People who He is, the one that brought the people out of slavery. The one who sets the people free. The one who accompanies the people throughout history.

The first word is the key one, I am your God, you shall have no God other than me. All the other words forbid false gods, in their many forms. Yes, the words are a moral code for society past and present, but they are one summary of many found in Scripture on how to behave in the presence of God. We are always in the presence of God, that is how we behave. We kid ourselves if we ever think we are not in the presence of God. By kidding ourselves immorality and sin can enter.

In the Gospel we meet God's word made flesh, Jesus. It is a very dramatic and challenging scene. Jesus is in the Temple, the holy place set aside for people to be in the presence of God. Jesus is unimpressed at the chaotic scene he finds there. False gods in the very place set aside for the one true God. God is forgotten amidst the money, commerce and profiteering. It was more a marketplace than a place set aside for prayer. Taking a whip, Jesus dramatically drives out the false gods, the livestock, the money changers, the sellers, and the money itself.

It was a prophetic act, it caused quite a stir and upset a lot of people. Jesus is questioned about his authority to do such an act. He is asked to justify his actions. On the face of it would appear little more than criminal damage.

Jesus replies, it is his Father's House and he, Jesus, is the very presence of God among the people. Destroy the temple and in three days he will raise it. Of course, a reference to his resurrection, which we will celebrate at Easter.

In short, we do not behave like that in the presence of God. Such behaviour is not acceptable and has no place in God's House.

This Mass begins a time of prayer and advocacy both here at St. Mary's Cathedral and at Newcastle Cathedral too. Our two Cathedrals and our two dioceses are privileged to host LOUDfence services. It is a time of prayer and advocacy focusing on behaviour that is totally unacceptable and has no place in church communities, no place in society and no place in the family life. That behaviour is abuse. All abuse, in particular abuse suffered by children and those who are vulnerable.

Abuse defiles the presence of God. Every human person is made in the image and likeness of God. Every human person is a Temple of God. Every human person is to be loved and respected. Every human person is to be shown the God given dignity that is their birthright. Abuse rejects that. It is evil, it is the very opposite of being in God's presence. Abuse kids itself that God is not present. It is sinful. It is abhorrent. Abusers kid themselves that God is not present. God sees all.

Jesus' response to abuse is to drive it out, with force. Like in the Gospel today. Abuse is not acceptable in God's House. In another passage of scripture Jesus says it would be better for a man to drown than to be an obstacle to the little ones. The language of exaggeration makes the point that abuse has no place.

Jesus takes out the whip and drives the evil away. So should we. All of us, especially those of us in authority in whatever walk of life. Abuse has no place.

Between now and 7pm on Wednesday when our time of prayer and advocacy will close with a service of the word at Newcastle cathedral, we are giving over our two cathedrals, inside and outside, to prayer for those who have been abused and those who have been affected by abuse. It is also a time of prayer and advocacy for us all, church communities, all in society and family life that abuse has no place.

After Communion I will invite Antonia to speak more about LOUDfence and this time in our cathedrals. Jesus took out a whip in the Temple to make the point. Whips will not be used here but other powerful symbols will be used. Prayer ribbons and other prayer items, artwork and words. The shoes on the sanctuary, both children's and adults', are a powerful and moving testimony of those who have suffered. We are all invited to pray and leave our prayer intentions for those who have suffered and been affected.

You may recall on the 19th July 2023, at my Installation Mass I invited Antonia to present me prayer ribbons to remember those who have suffered abuse and to remind me and us all of our duty to safeguard and protect. The ribbons were tied to my Cathedra, to my bishop's chair, and there they remain and will do so.

I am very pleased that Antonia and LOUDfence have accepted the invitation from us here at St. Mary's and the community at Newcastle cathedral to return and spend this time together. You are always welcome. I am most grateful that we have been able to co-host the LOUDFence in our two cathedrals at the same time. It is a powerful message of unity for this city and for our dioceses. Thank you.

Part of the artwork are the angel prayer cards. You can find them by Our Lady's Statue on the way out. They focus on a word that will come to our hearts and minds as we reflect on the evil of abuse and accompany those who suffer: Justice, betrayal, overwhelmed, dignity, honour, shame, despair, trust, fear, outrage.

I confess my eyes are drawn to the outrage image and words. I preached a little about that prayer card at my Installation. Jesus is outraged at the marketplace in the Temple. He drives it out.

I have been invited to give a short reflection at the closing service of the word on the angel image for outrage. I will save my words for then, but as a starter, the pose of the angel with sword drawn over the head, is strikingly similar to Jesus cleansing the Temple.

Why am I drawn to outrage. Simply it is what my heart and mind says to me. More than anger. How can we be anything other than outraged that any human being abuses or seeks to abuse another person. How can a person do that? It has no place. It is outrageous, and the justified rage should come out of us all.

For the horror of abuse, may the church be cleansed by Christ. For the horror of abuse, may society be cleansed by Christ, for the horror of abuse may families be cleansed by Christ.

For us all, may we always accompany those who have suffered abuse, those who are affected by abuse and may we all put into practice our duty to safeguard and protect.

May the Lord bless our LOUDfence here and at Newcastle Cathedral and bless all who will participate in any way.

God bless.