

Stoning the elephant in the room
17 March 2013

John 8:1-11

The 2008 film 'Doubt', based on John Patrick Shanley's Pulitzer Prize winning play of the same name, is set in a Roman Catholic church in the Bronx in the 1960s. Sister Aloysius, the principal of the attached school, played brilliantly by Meryl Streep, suspects Father Flynn, the parish priest, of having an improper relationship with a pupil and altar boy. She confronts him. And part of what makes the story so powerful is that we never get to find out whether Father Flynn is guilty, or whether Sister Aloysius has got it completely wrong.

Not surprisingly, Father Flynn is unimpressed by Sister Aloysius' accusations. And the next time he preaches in church, he tells the following story.

A woman was gossiping with a friend about a man she hardly knew - I know none of you have ever done this - that night she had a dream. A great hand appeared over her and pointed down at her. She was immediately seized with an overwhelming sense of guilt. The next day she went to confession. She got the old parish priest, Father O'Rourke, and she told him the whole thing.

'Is gossiping a sin?' she asked the old man. 'Was that the hand of God Almighty pointing a finger at me? Should I be asking your absolution? Father, tell me, have I done something wrong?'

'Yes!' Father O'Rourke answered her. 'Yes, you ignorant, badly brought-up female! You have borne false witness against your neighbour, you have played fast and loose with his reputation, and you should be heartily ashamed!'

So the woman said she was sorry and asked for forgiveness.

'Not so fast!' says O'Rourke. 'I want you to go home, take a pillow up on your roof, cut it open with a knife, and return here to me!'

So the woman went home, took a pillow off her bed, a knife from the drawer, went up the fire escape to the roof, and stabbed the pillow. Then she went back to the old parish priest as instructed.

'Did you gut the pillow with the knife?' he says.

'Yes, Father.'

'And what was the result?'

'Feathers,' she said.

'Feathers?' he repeated.

'Feathers everywhere, Father!'

'Now I want you to go back and gather up every last feather that flew out on the wind!'

'Well,' she said, 'it can't be done. I don't know where they went. The wind took them all over.'

*'And that,' said Father O'Rourke, 'is **GOSSIP!**'¹*

Last year, the Anglican Church in New Zealand was rocked by a scandal involving two senior members of this Diocese. Most of you will remember this. After all, it was all over the papers. But to those of you who don't know anything about it, I am sorry, but I am not going to say what happened or who was involved. Because it is not my intention today to name or shame the parties. I have only brought up this affair because I want to talk about some of the different reactions I observed.

Firstly, there were the gossipers. And the speculators, who wanted to know all the gory details, but didn't know them, so they had to imagine a few. I am not going to dwell on them, because the story I just told about Father O'Rourke and his gossiping parishioner says pretty much all I need to say about malicious gossip and unhealthy speculation. Except perhaps that I know what it is like to be the victim of malicious gossip. Many years ago now, somebody told my then partner that he thought I might be having an affair with a neighbour. Now this was completely untrue. But I believe it may have contributed to my partner becoming my ex partner not very long afterwards.

Then there were those who took the moral high ground, and loudly condemned those involved. Now I can accept some of them made some valid points. In particular, the observation that the ability of the

Anglican Church to take a position on marriage had possibly been compromised, at a time when the very definition of marriage was being debated. But I would add that the Church also demonstrated its leadership had personal experience that marriages do not always work, which in an ironic way added to its understanding of the subject.

In today's Gospel reading, the Scribes and the Pharisees tried to trick Jesus. If he had condemned the woman caught in adultery, he would no longer have been showing compassion to the people. But if he had not, he would have been showing contempt of the Law. In some ways, this was the reverse of last year's episode in our Diocese, in that religious leaders were judging an ordinary person, instead of ordinary people judging their religious leaders.

But regardless of who we are, not one of us is without sin, and Jesus caught the Scribes and the Pharisees out, when he uttered those famous words, 'Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her.'² Note how they did not leave together, but all slunk off separately. Like we do, they all had their guilty secrets. And like them, we have no right to condemn others for their sins.

But while it is easy to remember we must not cast the first stone, it is not so easy to remember Jesus also told the woman to sin no more. True repentance is more than being sorry for what we have done. It also requires a genuine desire to change our behaviour.

Which brings me to a very different reaction I observed: those who seemed to want to sweep the whole affair under the carpet and pretend it hadn't happened. But people read newspapers and listen to the news. They are not stupid.

I find it very difficult to criticise the Church. And, it would appear the Church has not learned to handle criticism well either. Several years ago, a friend blew the whistle on an episode of abuse in another Diocese. She thought she was doing the right thing. But it caused her nothing but grief.

Of course, this is very difficult to accept. The Church is the Body of the Christ in the world. We try to set very high standards for it. But as an institution that has human membership, it is not without flaws, for none of us will achieve perfection in this life. And I must confess that the first time I discovered the Church was not perfect, the feeling

was like finding out one had been cheated on, and I felt betrayed by an institution I loved.

When dark secrets are covered up, it just worsens the damage that occurs when they do get out. Which they usually do. And given the Church's historic practice of trying to be society's moral guardian, the media has a field day whenever the Church gets it wrong. So it saddens me when people tell me that the Church's moral failings mean they think it is no longer a relevant part of today's world.

It would no exaggeration to say that not a day goes by without there being something in the news about children having been abused by Roman Catholic priests. Now I am not for a moment denying the monstrosity of this offending, or the tremendous amount of healing that is required by the victims. But I am pretty confident the overwhelming majority of priests are innocent of such horrible actions.

And I can't help but wonder whether disproportionate media attention is paid to the failings of the Church over the failings of other institutions. When I was at primary school, I observed behaviour by some teachers that today would definitely be considered sexual abuse. Now don't get me wrong; I believe the overwhelming majority of teachers, just like the overwhelming majority of priests, are good people, who would never harm children. But some teachers, like some priests, are not so innocent. And it seems to me that schools do not get anything like the hammering in the media that the Church does when its dirty linen gets exposed to the light.

But back to our patch. I was disappointed by the gossiping and the judging that followed last year's events, and I was disappointed by the seeming reluctance of some in the Diocese to acknowledge it. And the only way I can describe these reactions all happening together is, 'stoning the elephant in the room'.

How would I have wanted to have seen the situation handled then?

I would have wanted to have heard less gossiping, less speculating, and less judging. I would have like to seen more obvious acknowledgment of hurt and betrayal – because people did feel hurt and betrayed. I would like to have felt a more tangible climate of forgiveness towards those who were involved, and some acceptance that we are never going to be able to stop two people from falling in love.

And I would like to have experienced more prayer of healing for those that had been hurt, more prayer for forgiveness and reconciliation, and more prayer that acknowledged the redeeming power of God's love.

So I ask you to remember, when we share in the Eucharist today, that we are the Body of Christ. While there may be flaws in the Body they are our flaws. And these flaws can help remind us of God's unfailing love in reconciling a flawed Church and healing a broken world.

Darryl Ward

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¹ 'Doubt' (2008)

² John 8:7b (NRSV)