

Contemporary Church Problems illuminated by the Gospel of John

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In chapters five to nine of the Gospel of John, the author examined some of the psychological and theological attitudes and behaviours that led the Jewish establishment to close their minds to Jesus and ultimately to crucify him. Some of the same factors can be found behind the inadequate response, at all levels of the Church, to the recent phenomenon of sexual abuse of children by clergy and religious. An examination of the Gospel may provide clues that help us understand the crisis more thoroughly and to respond more effectively.

A Lesson for Today's Church

Sexual abuse of minors by clergy and Church personnel is certainly sinful. Indeed, it is more than sin; it is a compulsive pathology. Equally importantly, it is a problem that involves more than the offenders. The abusers all belonged to a proud religious institution in which hierarchy, clergy and laity are all interconnected. The institution failed to respond with spontaneous compassion to the innocent victims; it overlooked them. Certainly, many in the system, from superiors to persons in the pews were ignorant of the abuse. Among those who knew, the first response, for a variety of reasons, was to defend the institution by keeping the matter quiet. Offending clergy, in comparison to their victims, were treated respectfully. Confidentiality prevailed.

When victims or their families went public, the Church as a whole— laity as well as clergy — deeply resented the ensuing publicity. Many were unwilling to believe the accusations. Those who went public were regarded with hostility and tended to be shamed and branded as disloyal.

People have become wiser since the events. Apologies and offers of compensation have been made to victims. Calls to repentance have been directed to the offending clergy and, in some cases, to their negligent superiors. However, repentance is hardly likely to address pathology. Can pathology be recognised more effectively, and potential offenders identified and treated?

Does the clerical state itself in some way attract potential offenders? Shaping an adequate response is the task of everybody in the Church.

More insidious and more difficult to address can be listed the unwillingness or inability of respected institutions to see the obvious; the instinct to defend and to close ranks; the obsession with secrecy and defending the good name (“seeking the glory that comes from men” [Jn 12.43; 7.18]); the spontaneous hostility towards those who rock the boat.

This article will review, not so much the abusive behaviour of the offenders, as the so far confused and inadequate response of bishops, priests, religious and laity to the underlying problems.

Situating the Question

What convinced the Jewish leaders, including conscientious Pharisees, to crucify Jesus? Why did so many ordinary people collude in their decision? Was the High Priest Caiaphas different from any contemporary national leader in his realistic judgment that “it is better to have one man die for the people than to have the whole nation destroyed” (Jn.11.50)?

For the Gospel’s author, emotions were possibly sharpened by his community’s experience of virulent opposition from conscientiously motivated Pharisees at the time when the Gospel was written, sixty or so years after some of their predecessors had murdered Jesus.

As disciples today cope with the on-going fallout to the sexual abuse, inevitably questions arise that have still to be adequately addressed. How come the blindness? How come the failure in compassion? How come the complicity in secrecy at all levels of the Church, from Pope to loyal laypeople? The Gospel of John warns us not to be surprised.

A partial answer to these questions lies in the power entrenched in the customary attitudes and behaviours of all human social groupings that share a common unity and similar vision, from nations at one end of the spectrum to smaller voluntary groups at the other. They tend to develop a mini-culture of their own, with their special ways of interacting and their own hierarchies. Some are more formally institutionalised than others. Among them can be named such intermediate bodies as churches, clergy, media, police forces, trade unions, along with the military, legal, medical and educational professions, and many more. When

interacting within such systems, people tend to think, feel and act differently from how they might were they alone – particularly if they hold positions of responsibility or influence.

Before examining the Gospel material in detail, it is important to recall the literary technique used by the author. The Gospel as a whole is a prolonged meditation on the significance of Jesus. It draws on memories of his historical life, seen through the prism of sixty years of reflection and prayer, under the inspiration of the Spirit of Truth. Though expressed in the form of discourse/dialogue/discussion between Jesus, disciples, various opponents and a cast of incidental characters, the words are the words of the Gospel's author. In time, the Church accepted the Gospel as a faithful expression of its sense of Jesus.

Systemic Sin in the Gospel of John

Chapter five. Chapter five of John's Gospel began with an account of Jesus healing a man who had been ill for thirty-eight years. The presenting problem was that Jesus worked the healing on the Sabbath. His action was seen by "the Jews" as a violation of Sabbath. Their reaction could have been otherwise. It could have been astonishment, leading to recognition of the presence and action of God. It could have been caution.

However, both astonishment and caution would have disrupted the comfortable status quo, called for a painful change of mindset and raised issues of power and authority.

In the current crisis, why were the offenders more readily believed than the victims? Why have offenders eventually been disowned but no critical examination yet made of the culture in which they were formed and which managed their subsequent behaviour?

In the discourse that followed Jesus' action, Jesus sought to justify his conduct. He cited the precedent already set by God. Contrary to the comment made in Genesis that "on the seventh day God rested" [Genesis 2.21], God obviously continued to operate and to create, even on the Sabbath, giving life to the new-born and judging those who died. Jesus claimed that his action reflected, and indeed revealed, the one whom he called his Father, a God who consistently gave life and who likewise ratified and honoured into eternity [judged] people's life choices for or against love. "My Father is still working, and I also am working." The author ominously noted, "for this reason the Jews were seeking ... to kill him [Jesus], because he was not only breaking the sabbath, but was also calling God his own Father, thereby making himself equal to God" [5.17-18]. Jesus' attempt to justify his action further

challenged the accepted mindset. His opponents persisted in ignoring the undeniable evidence of the healing rather than expanding their restricted but comfortable sense of God.

By his healing action and his justification of it, Jesus re-defined God and asserted his personal identity. Because of their accustomed mindset, according to which the Sabbath was unquestioningly respected, many Jews were instinctively unwilling to explore Jesus' challenge of special and unique relationship to God. They chose the psychological response of avoidance, even to the extent of the violent alternative of murder.

In the current problem, continued re-offending often led merely to new appointments. More challenging responses to the problem were avoided, even at the price of further violations.

After noting the determination of some to kill Jesus, the Gospel continued with a long discourse that developed in greater detail the themes already introduced. Jesus reflected and revealed the heart of God. Like his Father, Jesus gave life. His integrity became the touchstone by which people determined their future destiny, choosing to entrust themselves to him and his values ("believing") and thereby choosing "life"; or rejecting him and opting to remain enmeshed in the violent and destructive ways of the world. In this sense, Jesus "executes judgment" [Jn 5.27].

Unlike disciples, Jesus' opponents chose to remain ensnared within the closed ideology of their religious system. They were blind and unresponsive to the generally respected witness of the Baptist [5.33]. They were unwilling to draw the consequences of Jesus' unprecedented healing action and of the attractiveness of his integrity and authority.

As well, though claiming loyalty to their scriptures, their ideological stance desensitised them to the authentic interpretation of those scriptures [5.46-47]. In a somewhat similar way, a Church that proclaimed a preferential option for the oppressed failed to apply that option to the case of the victims.

Part 2

Chapter six interrupted the flow of the argument, though its general thrust was not entirely inappropriate. While focussing on Jesus as "the bread from heaven" [6.32], it developed the theme of Jesus giving "life" to all who would successfully break free from the constrictions of the safe and the familiar, and open themselves to the mystery of Jesus [6.40]. At the same

time, it highlighted the problem of the struggle to true faith, even of disciples [6.66]. To believe in another involves some degree of surrender of control. The inertia natural to any institution makes such yielding difficult.

Chapter seven. The argument resumed in chapter 7 (verse 14), where discourse changed to discussion. After a brief reflection on the witness of Moses and other scriptures justifying Jesus' attitude to Sabbath, Jesus openly challenged the Jews' decision to kill him, and accused them of thereby breaking the law. He insisted that they "not judge by appearances" but "with right judgment" [7.24]. This is a crucial observation of the Gospel's author. While people remain under the influence of their ideologies, they see only what they want to see.

Escape from the power of fixated social and religious attitudes would come about through the deliberate cultivation of "right judgment", the judgment of conscience. "Anyone who resolves to do the will of God will know whether the teaching is from God or whether I am speaking on my own" [7.17]. Doing so would require readiness to break free from the power of group acceptance (what the Gospel calls the pursuit of human "glory" [7.18]), and to enter into one's true self. It is the way of self-knowledge, and is the fruit of "abiding" in Jesus. It is the indispensable way to see reality and to escape the instinctive response of hostility.

Perhaps something more than self-knowledge is required in the present situation – an openness to learn from the developing insights into how human groups function, precisely as groups.

At this stage of the discussion the author deliberately differentiated the various actors involved: the "Pharisees and the chief priests", the "crowd" and, later, "those who believed in him". An effect of the differentiation was to indicate that the spontaneous, virulent and virtually unanimous hostility shown by the leaders was not the only possible response to Jesus.

The Pharisees and the chief priests were the powerful ones, those with most to lose when the social and religious structure came under siege. At the time of Jesus, the priests had sought control by resisting change; the Pharisees by guiding it. For both groups, control was paramount. In this case, their predictable response to take control was to flex their muscles and to send "temple police to arrest" Jesus [7.32].

When confronted with the ambivalent attitude of the temple police and of the crowd, the leaders sought to discount and disempower them by resorting to ridicule, branding the crowd as “accursed” [7.49]. Significantly, chief priests and Pharisees normally distanced themselves from one another. The presence of a common threat gave birth to an incongruous union.

Political leaders know well the power of demonising minority groups as a way to achieve a semblance of social unity - whether the scapegoats be prisoners, asylum seekers, Muslims or whatever. In the current problem of abuse, victim advocacy groups have often been strongly criticised.

One of the Pharisees, Nicodemus, broke ranks, reminding the leaders that to condemn Jesus without a hearing was against their law. Their response was not to examine his objection, but to close ranks more tightly, to insult him and thereby to isolate him [7.52].

Church personnel who have spoken out publicly in support of victims have risked being similarly judged as disloyal.

In the background, the Gospel examined the process unfolding among the crowd. Some discounted Jesus, branding him as “having a demon” (being out of his mind) [7.19]. The accusation relieved them of the need to listen carefully to what he was saying. Others tried to discern the legitimacy of Jesus. Some of them, on the basis of his signs, even believed in him as either the “prophet” or the “Messiah” [7.31, 41-3] – labels drawn from the tradition, but not the result of contemplative attention.

Throughout the discourse, the Gospel presented Jesus persisting with his call to conversion: “On the last day of the festival, the great day, while Jesus was standing there, he cried out, ‘Let anyone who is thirsty come to me, and let the one who believes in me drink’” [7.37-8].

Jesus’ call is highly significant. The prerequisite to faith is “thirst”, thirst for more, thirst for the transcendent – justice, truth, compassion, God. It was the experience of the first disciples: “What do you want?” “Where do you live?” “Come and see”. “And they came and stayed” [1.38-39]. It was the experience of the Samaritan woman: “Give me some of that water that I may never be thirsty” [4.15]. Faith presupposes a sense of incompleteness, a dissatisfaction, a certain restlessness, a search. It is never an exercise solely of detached reason. Only those who truly commit themselves in love know the deeper truth of another.

The Pharisees and the chief priests lacked this thirst. Complete and satisfied within the closed walls of their beliefs and practices, they were certain that they had the answers. They had made their law, not a way to God, but a substitute for God and for the contemplative knowledge of God. Their questions, even the gentle voice of conscience, were drowned in their certainties. Inner thirsts were dangerous. Questions were dangerous. The system had to be protected.

Perhaps a consequence of the Church's increasing confidence in its own infallibility over the past century and a half has been the felt need to look sinless as well. At every level of Church life, it has been difficult to admit, not only the sins of individuals, especially those in positions of trust and leadership, but the fallibility and imperfection of everyone. As institution, the Church's structures of accountability and transparency are clearly inadequate.

Part 3

Chapter eight. The drama resumed in chapter eight (after the interpolated text dealing with the woman caught in adultery) with Jesus' claim to be "the light of the world" [8.12]. As with his invitation to the thirsty, his offer of light made sense only to those who realised they were in the dark, and were still seeking. Repeating the accusation that he had made earlier: "Do not judge by appearances" [7.24], Jesus charged the Pharisees who objected to his claim that they judged "by human standards" [8.15]. A little later he warned the Jews: "You are of this world" [8.23]. Their judgments were clouded by the belief systems to which they were in thrall.

Looking more closely at Systemic Sin

At this stage of the interaction, the Gospel explicitly introduced the issue of sin: "you will search for me, but you will die in your sin" [8.21,24]. The discussion became more explicitly theological. Escape from sin(s) would be the fruit of faith in Jesus. Though the literary genre was a scripted interaction between Jesus and Jews, the author was theologising for the sake of his readers. Throughout the Gospel, his concern was to challenge and to nourish the faith of his community – to lead them ever closer to Christ. The power of sin operating in the Pharisees and the chief priests, and still operating in the community's Jewish opponents, could likewise operate within the Christian community itself.

Any human grouping, any institution, is particularly open to the deceptive power of sin. Why did good bishops instinctively act to defend the reputation of the Church rather than protect the victims? Why did fellow priests keep silence about suspicions or reservations they may have had regarding offenders? Why did loyal laypeople seek to silence advocacy groups and the media when they first publicised the abuse? Why did the Church as a whole not side with the victims but, instead, doubt their stories and discount the depth of the harm they suffered?

The discussion continued, but this time Jesus addressed, perhaps surprisingly, “the Jews who believed in him” [8.31] – effectively, the members of the author’s community and, by extension, his readers across the centuries. “If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples; and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free” [8.31-2]. The indispensable way to break free from the deadening, blinding power of any faith system is to draw closely to Jesus and to continue in his word – as the first disciples had done, who “went and stayed with him” [1.39]. The one way to know the truth of Jesus is the way of love. And only love can lead from notional alignment to personal transformation.

In the Gospel narrative, those “who believed in him” resented the inference that they were not already “free”. They cited as their justification, not their personal relationship with Jesus and their careful attention to his word, but their place within the proud tradition of Judaism. As “descendants of Abraham”, they claimed to be slaves to no one. Jesus’ response was to point out that, until they learnt to “continue in his word”, they would be little different from their fellow Jews who sought to kill him. They were still captive to their unquestioning confidence in their faith tradition.

Though they claimed Abraham as their “father”, they were certainly not taking after him. Abraham was not a “company man”. He was a man who thirsted for more, who abandoned his familiar homeland and his people in answer to a mysterious call from a God whose face he had not seen but whose voice he had heard calling faintly in the depths of his spirit.

Their resistance to notice and to respond to the God calling in their depths, along with their instinctively resistant “group thinking” towards Jesus, meant that they were following a different “father”. The Gospel identified that father as the “devil”.

For the author, their unanimity in attitudes of hostility and blindness to the obvious were assurance of the influence of the devil. Effectively, their mind-set identified the sin of the world. “You are from your father the devil, and you choose to do your father’s desires. He

was a murderer from the beginning and does not stand in the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks according to his own nature, for he is a liar and the father of lies” [8.44].

The Gospel “upped the ante” – and perhaps appropriately. In the whole sorry story of abuse, there seems to be a power at work greater than blind dynamics influencing human interactions. There is confusion and resistance to probe more deeply. Though the priority of victims’ needs has been recognised; though offenders have been condemned and called to repentance; though steps have been taken to ensure that potential offenders are not ordained; though a handful of negligent bishops have been rebuked, yet the clerical culture itself has not been reviewed. The existence of other possible problems seems to be denied at the highest level.

As long as they remain unredeemed, social and religious institutions are seedbeds of unrecognised, repressed and unowned mutual hostilities. The Gospel would say their potential is “murderous”, either actually or metaphorically, though their members manage to maintain a state of psychological denial. To the extent that people deceive themselves, the Gospel would say that they are “liars”. Institutions retain a fragile unity by channelling their hostility towards outsiders, offenders or dissident insiders. Within social systems, mechanisms of hostility, denial and deception are contagious.

They can be redeemed only when compassion and forgiveness replace hostility; and when true unity is achieved, not by the rejection of a common enemy, but by the contemplative, loving acceptance of individuality and difference. The Gospel saw this realised through committed relationship to Jesus, adherence to his “word”, discovery of the deepest desires of the heart and sensitivity to the quiet voice of God echoing in personal conscience.

How can people break through deeply embedded denial and deception? Jesus hoped that his own innocent execution and his reconciling resurrection would provide the necessary shock and incentive: “When you have lifted up the Son of Man, then you will realize that I am he” [8.28]. Later in the narrative he would express a similar hope: “When I am lifted up from the earth, I will draw all people to myself” [12.32].

Has it been too easy to grow used to crucifixion?

Perhaps predictably, the response of Jesus' opponents was continued denial, expressed, this time, in exclusion: "You are a Samaritan and have a demon" [8.48] – or, in other words, "You do not belong to us and are obviously out of your mind". Jesus quietly responded: "Your ancestor Abraham rejoiced that he would see my day; he saw it and was glad" [8.57].

Abraham heard the call of God to an unknown future; he moved away from his familiar and constricted homeland – and responded wholeheartedly to God's promise, about to be realised in the redeeming work of Jesus.

As if to illustrate the murderous dynamic inexorably at work, the Gospel observed: "They picked up stones to throw at him, but Jesus hid himself and went out of the temple" [8.59]. Lynch the "outsider" – and prove the point!

Dramatised Theology

Chapter nine. To conclude this section of his narrative, the author masterfully presented a dramatic enactment of the operation of sin as he had outlined it in the preceding chapters. The story began with Jesus' gift of sight to a man who had been "born blind from birth".

In the common estimation the man was different, deficient. As such he was excluded, branded a sinner and forced to the margins of society: "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" [9.2]. Jesus used the occasion to redefine sin and to show it exemplified, not in physical blindness but in collective moral blindness.

In the present situation confronting the Church, might Jesus identify sin, not simply in the deeds of the offenders, but also in the unexamined collective culture of the whole Church?

As with the healing of the man who had been ill for thirty-eight years – which had occasioned the earlier discussion about the sin of the world – so, too, Jesus performed this intervention on a Sabbath. Despite the obvious witness of what was more a creative than a healing action of Jesus, some Pharisees concluded: "This man is not from God, for he does not observe the Sabbath" [9.15]. However, not all concurred: corporate unity was at risk. When questioned once more, the man stated that Jesus was something more than a healer – he was a "prophet" [9.17].

Under pressure to deny the obvious, the Jews sought confirmation of the man's blindness from his parents. The parents affirmed his blindness as a fact, but sought to distance

themselves from the whole event. In light of the practice adopted by the Jewish mainstream by the time of the Gospel's composition, the narrative observed: "His parents said this because they were afraid of the Jews; for the Jews had already agreed that anyone who confessed Jesus to be the Messiah would be put out of the synagogue" [9.23]. As has been noted previously, human groupings invariably seek to maintain threatened unity by ostracising dissidents.

In a pathetic effort to remain in denial of the obvious, the Pharisees insisted: "We know that this man is a sinner" [9.25]. Given their closed minds and their unshakeable trust in their ideology, they automatically assumed they "knew" – because Jesus had not observed the Sabbath in the way they expected. The man, on the other hand, simply underlined the fact of his healing. Obstinate unwilling to face the clear evidence, they questioned him again about the way that the healing had been performed. In a wonderful display of humour, the man mocked their obtuseness, and proceeded to remind them that such creative activity could prove only that Jesus was "from God" [9.33]. Unable to answer his logic or deny reality, they resorted to labelling him a "sinner", and "drove him out" [9.34]. Criticise and exclude from community the uncomfortable maverick – anything to remain in denial and to avoid the need to change!

When asked by Jesus if he "believed in the Son of Man", the healed man affirmed his readiness, and went even further, addressing Jesus with the post-resurrection title of Lord: "'Lord, I believe'. And he worshipped him" [9.38]. The blind man's status as the one victimised enabled him, from his position as victim, to see the truth that the Jewish leaders, from their position as upholders of the institution, were unable to grasp.

Over the course of the story, the blind man had moved from physical blindness to true religious insight. His confession of faith occasioned Jesus' comment: "I came into this world for judgement so that those who do not see may see, and those who do see may become blind" [9.39]. In replying to the Pharisees who challenged the latter part of his comment, Jesus said to them: "If you were blind, you would not have sin. But now that you say, 'We see', your sin remains" [9.41]. Sin takes practical shape in blindness; it nourishes exclusion; it is hostile – springing, as the Gospel would have it, from the original Principle of Evil who was "a murderer and a liar from the beginning" [8.44].

Searching the Gospel to find a Solution

According to the Gospel of John, systemic sin is the deeper sin, the origin of other sins. How can it be met?

While people need systems in order to interact socially, they need to learn to base genuine community on love, mutual respect and openness to difference, not on ideology and accepted customs [5.10]; nor a common enemy [7.32]; nor the exclusion of dissenters [7.47-48; 9.35]). They need to face everyone's propensity to sin, and not to deny it or to cover up. Jesus hoped that his shocking death and unexpected resurrection, his being "lifted up", would serve to alert people to the sinfulness embedded in human groupings [8.28; 12.32].

People need to call each other respectfully to accountability, as did Nicodemus [7.51]. They need to speak the truth without fear [8.32]. They need courage to risk rejection and to let go of "the glory that comes from one another" [5.54]. It is too easy to be convinced that "we know" [9.25], that "we see" [9.41]. People need to help each other, somehow, to recognise both personal and institutional blindness.

To do this successfully they need perpetually to be alert to, and consciously detach themselves from, the psychological and social forces that inevitably operate within any organised group. They need to become aware of their own instinctive hostility towards those who are different. They need to learn to know themselves. How?

According to the Gospel, this can happen only as they listen to the word of Jesus illuminating their hearts. They need to "remain in his word" [8.31] and grow close to him if they are to break free from the pervasive social power of sin: "if the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed" [8.36]. As disciples of the innocent Victim, they need to learn to stand in the shoes of victims everywhere and try to see reality through their eyes – deliberately, fearlessly (as did the blind man so successfully in the Gospel story). The only adequate response to the blindness of the world is to learn to stand in the shoes of Christ, the crucified one, "the light of the world" [8.12]. To succeed requires effort; it calls for imagination; it demands unrelenting discipline.

Further Reading

The author acknowledges his debt to the works of James Alison, particularly his book, *Faith Beyond Resentment*, Darton, Longman and Todd, London, 2002

