

Advent 3: End time and abuse of women

While researching for this sermon, I came across an open letter on the blog of Jeannie Babb Taylor that began with question: *Pastor, have You Ever Preached A Sermon About Domestic Violence?*

Well, I have. A couple of years ago we were asked after the Cape Town Diocesan Synod to address this very issue. Do you realise that I arrived in this parish 5 years ago this coming January? So, in other words, over the last 5 years or 260 Sunday sermons, I've addressed the issue of domestic abuse, abuse of women and children, a grand total of twice. Is this enough?

Last year Carol Hartley lent me a book by the feminist writer and theologian Phyllis Trible which included an essay on the bible story of the Rape of Tamar. This essay is from collection of her writings called "Texts of Terror". And texts of terror they are, as we face them in the pages of scripture, and therefore at the heart of our inheritance of faith. They are a litany of pain and degradation and abuse and oppression and power and suffering. I used the phrase "Bible story" to describe the story of Tamar in 2Samuel chapter 13, but even as I typed that phrase "Bible story" I thought, "No, that is not the right phrase because bible story means sweet innocent stories about the goodness of God with brightly coloured illustrations of men and women dressed like the shepherds at nursery school nativity play with dressing gowns wrapped around them and tea-towels on their heads. But besides having brightly coloured illustrations, bible stories also contain darkness and blackness. Stories such as The Levite and his concubine in Judges chapter 19, the daughter of Jephthah in Judges chapter 11, the story of Hagar in Genesis chapter 16 and 21, and the rape of Tamar. Four stories, four women, who in their loss and suffering and pain make a place in our faith tradition for all women, and especially for women who have suffered violence at the hands of others and often from their own families.

Andrew Hunter, Dean of Grahamstown, while he was an Archdeacon here in Cape Town preached movingly on abuse at a Cathedral evensong. He said: *I have a wife. I have two daughters. I have a sister, a mother, aunts, a mother-in-law, nieces, girl cousins, colleagues and friends who are women. When I read one of these texts of terror, or when I read or hear a report in the news of rape, or abuse, I cringe, I am angry, I am appalled. When Jacob Zuma's supporters toy-toyed outside the Durban High Court, hurling abuse at his accuser, I and many other South Africans, and many other men, are outraged and disgusted. When I read Helen Brain's book, Here be Lions – a memoir not suitable for children, and reflect on all that she writes and the story that she tells, including our church's struggles with these issues, or when I think back only a few years to the pain we all went through, you here at the Cathedral, and we in the rest of the diocese, over a priest who was accused of rape, I want to weep."*

Andrew also remembered as I do, sitting in at a Bishop's Forum, as we were presented with what felt like a set of stereotypes of arrogant male attitudes towards women. One of the clergy present finally voiced his opposition to what he felt was "a feminist attack on all men". But the presenter had been very clever. She had merely prompted us with questions and us male clergy had given her the answers, all of which painted this stereotypical picture of male attitudes. She had **not** presented it to us, we had presented it to her.

One can reject the stereotypes but still enjoy the jokes, as Andrew Hunter and his very blonde daughters do, with their collection of blonde jokes. Two blondes who were lounging next to the swimming pool somewhere in Constantia, and the one looks dreamily up into the sky and says to the other, "I wonder which is closer, the moon or Durban?" The other replies, "Duh, of course it must be the moon – you can't even see Durban from here!"

But have we moved on from the old stereotypes? Or do we still, quietly, to ourselves, justify them? What about collective responsibility? To what extent do all men carry the responsibility for what some men do to women, just as it could be argued that, to some extent, all whites carry some responsibility for apartheid and racism and all Germans carry the responsibility for Nazism and the Holocaust?

Have we as men become immune? Do we simply shrug our shoulders and walk by on the other side and say, "It's not me, it's not my problem?" How do we as men respond when our brothers, our fellow men, do dreadful things? How do we respond when RAPCAN informs us that, according to research, "perpetrators are getting younger, and that the incidence of crimes involving youths younger than 18 years has increased in the past two years" – in other

words, as we see a lowering in the age at which young males begin to behave violently towards women and girls – how do we respond?

And how do we help remember? Who remembers Valencia Farmer – that young girl who was gang-raped in Elsie's River a few years back, was left for dead, but managed to survive long enough to identify at least some of her attackers? Who remembers her now? And as Cape Town reels with the shock of another young, young girl being abducted, raped and murdered by a close relative – do we remember? In a few years, who will remember all their names?

The parents of these children, these young people, will remember. Their school mates, their friends, will remember. Every woman, every girl who heard their stories will remember. But I hope that every man, as well, will remember: that these events become, like the texts of terror in the scriptures, part of our collective memory, and that as we remember, we say again and again, it should not be like this.

Perhaps one of the worst things that can happen is that, collectively, we forget; that we shrug our shoulders and say, "These things happen," that we take refuge in blame – she was asking for it, or she was wearing a low cut mini dress, or her parents should not have sent her out, she was a bad sort, she was clubbing, or drinking ... and we are unable to say and to believe and to know and to proclaim that rape and violence against women (and men), is deeply, deeply wrong, that a culture, whether formal or informal, which promotes or encourages this behaviour, is sick and needs healing, that attitudes that allow these things to go unchecked need to be challenged and repented of, that a justice system that makes it so very hard for victims of rape to receive justice is not a system of justice.

As we do these things, as we accept collective responsibility, and as we remember, we are honouring all women in our country, in our communities, in our families, in our churches. Today we are honouring, Heidi Engela, Madison and Nnaputaeke who are to be baptised. We are honouring these children's mothers' who have carried them during their pregnancy and we remember the women of the bible and their sisters down the centuries, those whose trust and vulnerability has been so abused. We cry out with them, we weep and rage and grieve with them.

The Canticle we used as our Psalm this morning stated: *They shall beat their swords into ploughshares and their spears into pruning hooks* As we continue to reflect deeply on the biblical stories which have become part of our tradition, that deal with abuse of women, as we embrace them and all survivors and victims of violence and rape and abuse – women and men, girls and boys – we come into the presence of Jesus whose sandals we are not worthy to undo, yet we also **become** him and we begin to be a sign of God's love, and God's authority, over the chaos and terror of this world as we await for Jesus' coming in glory. And we can begin to proclaim: *All you of the house of Jacob; come let us walk in the light of the Lord.*

Afterword:

Oh yes! My previous sermon about abuse did have an affect at least on one parishioner who approached me afterwards to help her deal with delicate situation within her family. Oh for the day when all the words are gentle and all homes are safe. It's up to us, though. It's up to me as a clergy person to speak the truth in public at times like this. It's up to us to teach our children how to relate to one another and how to handle arguments. It's up to us to reach out to one another in moments of grief and not to turn our heads when we see violence.

We need not to take **care** of the woman with bruises; we need simply to **be there** with her. We need not to **fix** her problem, we need simply to let her **know** that she can survive and have a better life. We need not to make it all better for her; we need simply to end the cycle in our own lives.

Rev. Rebecca Parker writes, "When I was in distress, I did not turn to my family or my church. In both places, I had learned that personal need had no place." We must ensure from henceforth, that this is a place where your hurt, fear, confusion and need are met with love and compassion. This place, this sacred space is for all of you, battered and broken, saddened and spiritless, happy and healthy. Our shared compassion for you all will be carried in our hearts as we journey towards a world transformed by acts of love and justice as look ahead for the coming of Jesus.

Based on a sermon by Andrew Hunter