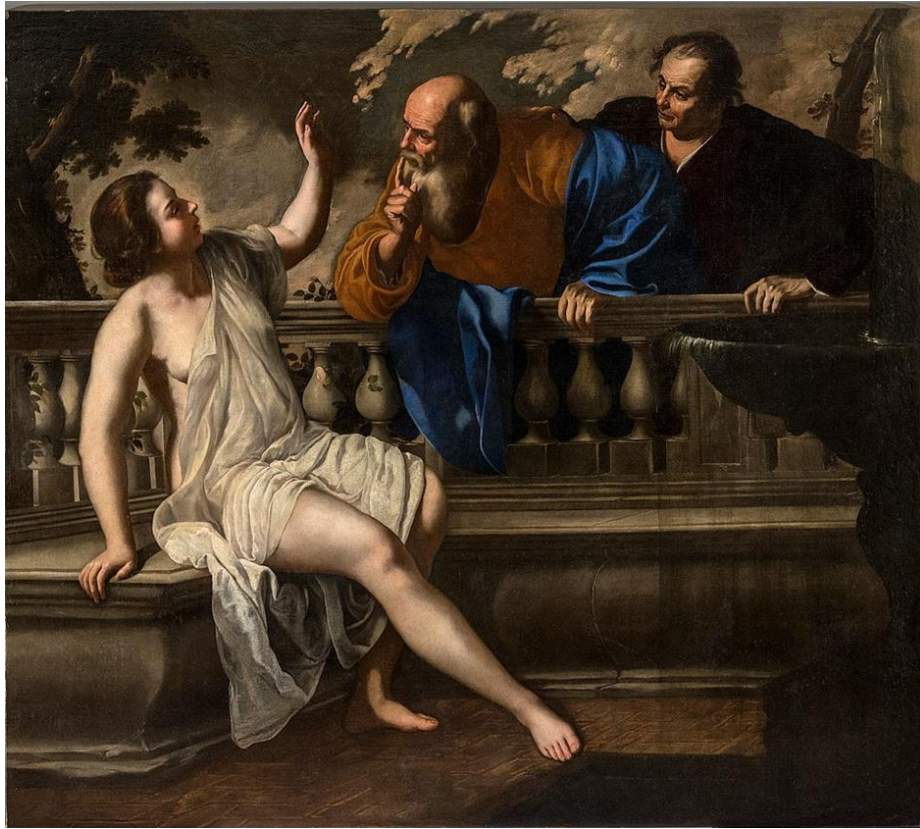


Week 3: Susanna and the Elders

The Sunday after Ascension (Easter 7B)

Acts 1.15-17, 21-26; Ps 1; 1 John 5.9-13, John 17.6-19



PRAYER FOR DFV PREVENTION MONTH

God who brings new shoots from old stumps
flesh and breath from dry bones
and goodness from chaos:
we pray for members of our community
whose lives are limited by the effects of family violence and abuse.
Make us people of deep listening, of courageous conflict
and commitment to the ways of healing and reconciliation,
that our communities might be places
where love and peace prevail
and even the least of us belong.
We pray this through Jesus who journeyed through death to life
that we might do the same. Amen.

STORY TELLING:

In 2018, Julia Baird and Hayley Gleeson conducted a lengthy investigation into how religion and faith intersect with domestic violence; how it might impact the behaviour of perpetrators or shape the actions of victims, and how women in faith communities might have particular vulnerabilities, or, especially, concerns about how their leaders respond to them....

“The stories of the Christian women we interviewed were brutal: repeated rape, verbal assault, physical beatings, complete financial control, needing to ask permission for simple things such as drinking lemonade, or going to the shops.

“Their treatment had resulted in destroyed lives, shattered self-esteem, and suicide attempts. Husbands tried to use scripture to control their wives, demanding female obedience to male abuse.

“And in very many cases the local pastors did not believe the women when they told them of their stories. Or they told them to submit to their husbands, endure, and stay....

“The insistence by many public Christian voices that churches are safer places because a religion of love and selfless kindness should be anathema to abuse has blinded, and still blinds many, to what was, and is, occurring in their midst.

“Overall, we heard repeatedly from counsellors and psychologists that Christian women are less likely to leave abusive marriages, more

likely to blame themselves for abuse, more prone to believe the abuse will change, and unlikely to be protected by their pastors.

“We found many women felt forced to leave a church when they left a relationship; that they felt forced to choose between faith and safety, and their faith was severely challenged as result....

“One woman told the Victorian royal commission that she had sought help from five different ministers and that each of them had told her to stay with a violent husband. One counsellor said" "Be gentle with him, he's trying to be a man."

“Another reported telling her pastor that her husband was raping, hitting, and verbally abusing her, while taking drugs. The pastor told her to pray. She then asked him, "What if he kills me first?" And the pastor said: "At least you'll go to heaven."..."

Julia Baird, [Domestic violence in the church: When women are believed, change will happen](#), Posted Wed 23 May 2018.

PAUSE FOR REFLECTION

What stands out to you from these stories? Did any new idea or images emerge? What responses do you notice in yourself as you read or hear the story and reflection?

READING THE SCRIPTURES

JOHN 17.6-19

Jesus prayed, “I have made your name known to those whom you gave me from the world. They were yours, and you gave them to me, and they have kept your word. Now they know that everything you have given me is from you; for the words that you gave to me I have

given to them, and they have received them and know in truth that I came from you; and they have believed that you sent me. I am asking on their behalf; I am not asking on behalf of the world, but on behalf of those whom you gave me, because they are yours. All mine are yours, and yours are mine; and I have been glorified in them. And now I am no longer in the world, but they are in the world, and I am coming to you. Holy Father, protect them in your name that you have given me, so that they may be one, as we are one. While I was with them, I protected them in your name that you have given me. I guarded them, and not one of them was lost except the one destined to be lost, so that the scripture might be fulfilled. But now I am coming to you, and I speak these things in the world so that they may have my joy made complete in themselves. I have given them your word, and the world has hated them because they do not belong to the world, just as I do not belong to the world. I am not asking you to take them out of the world, but I ask you to protect them from the evil one. They do not belong to the world, just as I do not belong to the world. Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth. As you have sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world. And for their sakes I sanctify myself, so that they also may be sanctified in truth.

REFLECTION

This study is titled *Susanna and the Elders*, although that story from the Book of Daniel is not one of the lectionary readings for this week. It is the title of the painting included with the study, as painted by Italian artist Artemisia Gentileschi in 1652. The story tells of a young woman spied on by two elders as she bathed in her own garden. When the voyeurs were caught they deflected the blame onto Susanna, claiming she was engaged in an illicit relationship and they were merely bringing her actions to the attention of the community.

Gentileschi appears to have painted this subject at least 5 times over the course of her life, and this is the last version. I encourage you to find the others, particularly the [first version](#) painted in 1610, when Gentileschi was turning 18.

Back to the gospel: the idea of unity is a powerful touchstone for Christians. Jesus prayed on his last night “that they may be one, as you and I are one” (v11) and we have aspired to unity ever since. But Jesus also prayed to his Father, “They do not belong to the world, just as I do not belong to the world.” So this passage from John’s gospel draws us into a complex space: we are not of the world and we are one.

Jesus knew that his followers would have to contend with the prevailing culture, both then and now, and that culture would challenge their faithfulness. What then is the culture into which we Christians are sent today and how do we engage faithfully with it?

It has been suggested that in Jesus’ time the greater danger was that Christians would withdraw from the world and pursue a kind of purity within the church community. Today it is arguable that we are more at risk from being *too* embedded with the culture and fail to recognise the ways in which faith challenges those norms.

In the case of domestic and family violence we seem to have adopted the worst of both worlds: we cling to a ‘biblical’ ideal about marriage and families that make it difficult for people experiencing abuse in the home to speak up about it. And at the same time we have adopted views about masculinity and power from the culture that are antithetical to the gospel of Jesus.

However we got here, the result is that when people experience domestic and family violence and abuse, it is almost impossible for them to speak up about it with their church community. They are all too aware of the expectation that marriage is for life, for example, to suggest in their faith community that *their* marriage is not sacramental. And they are also aware of the ways in which patriarchal norms play themselves out in our communities of faith. The result is unity, but at what cost? Who pays for our assumption that we are focusing on important matters such as upholding the institution of marriage? Who pays for our unwillingness to examine male privilege in the church and our reluctance to interrogate what we just assume to be true?

It is almost always the people with less power who pay for our comfort.

[William Loader writes](#) that “unity was not an ideal in itself, but always and only in the context of unity with the Son and Father. Unity can be a collusion of betrayal.” Christian unity is often regarded as an expression of peace, demanding that everyone is always nice and any conflict is seen as failure. True love and peace, by contrast, is about making and having space where conflicts can be dealt with, worked through and, if need be, lived with, but in a way which does not turn them to destructiveness.

Gentileschi’s paintings of Susanna being spied on by the Elders reflects her own experiences at the hands of authorities. As a survivor of sexual assault at the age of 18, she reported the assault and her assailant, Agostino Tassi was brought to trial. She was tortured in court, to assure the truth of her claim, while her assailant was found guilty but the sentence was never enforced. He remained

a popular painter defended by the Pope who said of him, “Tassi is the only one of these artists who has never disappointed me.”

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. If the ‘world’ that Jesus is talking about is indeed the culture, how would you describe the culture into which we are sent today? Are there aspects of culture that challenge Christian living? Are there aspects of our culture that allow domestic and family violence to thrive?
2. How does the desire for unity play out in talking about domestic and family violence in a church context? How does it help us speak up? How does it work to silence people?
3. William Loader suggests that “True ... peace ... is about making and having space where conflicts can be dealt with.” Talk about your experiences of conflict within faith communities. What triggers conflict and how is it dealt with? How do you tend to respond to situations of potential or actual conflict?

FURTHER RESOURCES

www.respect.gov.au Federal government website hosts resources and links to other organisations

<https://www.itstimetotalk.net.au/> A website developed to help individuals of all ages understand how to form healthy, long lasting relationships.

<https://www.saferresource.org.au/> Resources for Churches to talk about domestic and family violence (from Common Grace)

CLOSING PRAYERS

A confession regarding church responses to domestic and family violence

Father, please give us grace and insight to face uncomfortable truths about how the gospel has been misused and our church communities have been complicit in the abuse of vulnerable people. Please help us not to downplay or deny our involvement, but help us to see our own individual and collective responsibilities.

For the times where we have sheltered and supported abusers in place of the abused, we are sorry, and we repent.

For the times where we have spoken, counselled or taught thoughtlessly or insensitively, or wrongly, we are sorry.

For the hurt that we have caused or perpetuated or excused, we are sorry.

We thank you that you are merciful and you take our wrongs so seriously that Jesus died for them. We ask that you would enable true and full repentance within us and our churches that healing and transformation would abound. Amen.

(From Common Grace, [16 Days of Prayer against Domestic and Family Violence](#))