



Shame

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A month before I turned 17 I had a major spine operation for scoliosis. The surgeon fused much of my spine and placed a metal rod next to my spine to support it during the healing phase. On my skin, above my spine, I have a long scar and another scar on my hip where the surgeon took a bone graft. I lived for six months in plaster and for another six months with a back brace. Just before my 18th birthday, I didn't need this stuff any more.

At the time, I was living in Tasmania and there weren't many beach going days. I liked to go to the beach near where we lived but that January I didn't want to go. After a year of being noticeably different, with my plaster and my brace, I didn't want to be different any more. I didn't want people to see my scars. I didn't want people to ask questions or comment. I wanted to hide that part of my life from the gaze of others.

Throughout the course of life there are events, actions, decisions and the like which we want to hide from the gaze of others. Sometimes we feel or act this way because our choices are rightly confidential. We name these things as part of our private domain. Other times we act this way because we feel distressed, humiliated by our sharp or growing awareness of the foolish, or wrong behaviour we or those closely associated with us have engaged in. Our responses and reactions are motivated by shame.

Shame is a powerful emotion. It is present in nearly all individuals, cultures and communities. Each one finds a way of responding to it. Most of us learn about shame through the experience of being shamed for something we've done that is wrong or have been convinced is wrong.

Shame is present in our church communities. It shapes much of our behaviour at subconscious levels and needs to be addressed if our communities are to be safe and healthy places for all people.

We need to address **wrongful shaming** -

- There are people who are or who used to be part of our church communities who have been made to feel that they have done the wrong thing by speaking about their experience of domestic violence or sexual abuse. They have felt ostracised, isolated or belittled for speaking about their experience. We need to be communities that affirm, over and over, the blessing of their bravery in speaking out. We need to be with them, agents of their healing.

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- There are people who have been made to feel they have done the wrong thing when they have spoken about deep physical or mental health issues. They have learnt that they can't talk about these things with church people. We need to be communities which are open to hearing and responding to people as they express their deepest needs.

We need to help people **carry the burden of shame**. We want no one to feel she or he cannot receive grace or redemption even if it means he or she will forever live differently. In a sense, they are a person with a scar. People may always be marked by their experience, mistake, wrongdoing or crime. It is part of their story and may

be a scandal to others. Yet, each one can be given strategies to address and redress any pain they have caused. They can be supported not to repeat what they have done. They can be given help to live with their memories. Every one can discover that they are better than the worst thing they have ever done.

We need to help people make the **transition from shame**. We can often carry the burden of shame because of the actions of others. Parents can feel shame because of their children. Employees can feel shame because of their bosses. Congregations can feel shame because of their priest or lay workers.

- There are congregations and communities in which harm has been done to others who need support to learn the skills needed to speak of their thoughts and feelings. They can be captured by shame and have no way of speaking about it. Shame becomes the "elephant in the room" that shapes all that goes on. Thoughtful conversation, often assisted by others, can bring great healing and hope.
- There are clergy who feel diminished by the conduct of other clergy and lay workers and who lose their sense of worth and contribution. Congregations can be quick to pass criticism and slow to offer praise and thus intensify this loss of self-esteem. Simple practices of gratitude and affirmation can make a world of difference and change the course of this downward spiral.

Christians have a long tradition of engaging shame. The authorities of Jesus' day tried to heap shame on him. The ultimate shame being the indignity and suffering of the cross. Our Lord has been in the place of shame and so meets us there whether we wrongly or rightly feel shame. He is present with us in our pilgrimage.