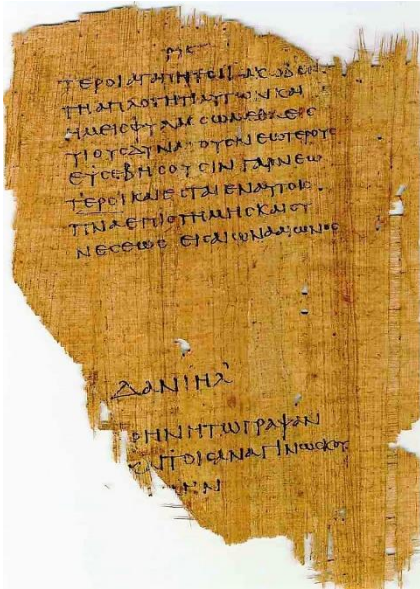

CHURCH SEXUAL ABUSE, AUTHORITY & SPIRITUALITY

A personal reflection on Susanna & Daniel in Chapter 13, Old Testament Book of Daniel
by Fr. Gerry Hefferan

THE BOOK OF DANIEL



The Book of Daniel in the Old Testament has an interesting history of compilation.

There are Hebrew, Aramaic and Greek language sections and different literary styles.

Its setting is around the 6th Century BCE in Babylon, and its stories and compilation accounts are from the 3rd – 2nd century BCE.

Chapters 13 and 14 are in the ancient Greek Septuagint version but not in the Hebrew version. Both chapters are recognized as God's Word in the Catholic Bible.

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CONTRAST

This reflection is about Susanna and Daniel, as **contrasted** with two Judges in Chapter 13.

There are some points that have been helpful to me in prayer. As we look at the story, some parallels are offered for today.

We, as People of God, reflect on Susanna, a person of faith who trusts in God, and Daniel who is inspired by God to defend her innocence.

This reflection uses the text from the *New Revised Standard Version* Catholic Edition of the Bible.

I have spaced the lines and paragraphs to aid with reflection.

The passage uses a word play to suggest *contrasts*.

A mastic tree (schinon) is small and the name sounds like the verb to split (schisai).

An oak tree (prinon) is large and the name could hint at the verb to saw (poisai).

The passage begins with four people - a married couple Susanna and Joakim who are **contrasted** with two elders recently appointed as Judges.

SUSANNA

Susanna is 'a very beautiful woman and one who feared the Lord'.

We are told that 'Her parents were righteous' and had trained her 'according to the law of Moses'.

A devout Jewish person knows the religious terms that describe Susanna. We might not be as familiar with those terms.

The People of God can learn from the Jewish prayer of the Psalms about righteous and righteousness:

'The Lord is righteous; he loves righteous deeds' [Psalm 11:7]

'The eyes of the Lord are on the righteous, and his ears are open to their cry' [Psalm 4:15]

'He loves righteousness and justice' [Psalm 33:5]

'I will praise your righteousness, yours alone' [Psalm 71:16]

'You are righteous, O Lord, and your judgements are right' [Psalm 119:137]

'Your righteousness is an everlasting righteousness, and your law is the truth' [Psalm 119:142]

Susanna has been formed by her 'righteous' parents in knowing her 'righteous' God.

Again, we go back to the description of Susanna who was raised in a spirituality 'according to the law of Moses.'

Her spiritual heritage and upbringing are

centred on a faithful relationship with God, living out the covenants between God and her people, a spirituality inspired by the model of her 'righteous' parents.

Her people are in captivity in Babylon, yet God is still with them.

Her people know that God saved them in the Exodus.

There is a striking **contrast** between Susannah and her genuine spirituality of living the law of God and that of the corruption of the two elders.

A contrast between spirituality and corruption.

In this story her husband, Joakim is very rich and honoured. with a fine house and garden. The house is big enough for court to be held there. And we know little else about him.

The story begins:

'There was a man living in Babylon whose name was Joakim. He married the daughter of Hilkiyah, named Susanna, a very beautiful woman and one who feared the Lord.'

Her parents were righteous and had trained their daughter according to the law of Moses. Joakim was very rich, and had a fine garden adjoining his house; the Jews used to come to him because he was the most honored of them all.'

TWO ELDERS/JUDGES

The people had appointed two elders that year as Judges. And God sees that they are wicked. Neither of them are called 'righteous'.

'That year two elders from the people were appointed as judges.

Concerning them the Lord had said:

"Wickedness came forth from Babylon, from elders who were judges, who were supposed to govern the people."

These men were frequently at Joakim's house, and all who had a case to be tried came to them there.'

The story continues with the **contrast** between Susanna and the Two Elders.

'When the people left at noon,

Susanna would go into her husband's garden to walk. Every day the two elders used to see her, going in and walking about, and they began to lust for her. They suppressed their consciences and turned away their eyes from looking to Heaven or remembering their duty to administer justice.

Both were overwhelmed with passion for her, but they did not tell each other of their distress, for they were ashamed to disclose their lustful desire to seduce her.

Day after day they watched eagerly to see her.'

These two elders each lust for Susanna.

Each seeks to use his own power to seduce her.

Each has power and authority in a religious Jewish society.

Each plans a criminal act and intends to sin against Susanna and against God.

Their lust is central.

This ancient story has parallels with the modern church sexual abuse of children and vulnerable adults.

Religious figures trusted and esteemed, who abuse their authority and use their position and power for their own depravity.

They 'who were supposed to govern the people'.

They also fail in their governance because:

'They suppressed their consciences'

‘and turned away their eyes from looking to Heaven’

‘or remembering their duty to administer justice’.

These issues of authority, power and governance are all issues in the modern church today for us.

- Suppressing one’s conscience,
- Not turning to God and living as God wants us to act,
- Not living out the responsibilities that go with ministry and justice.

Governance includes conscience, fidelity to God, responsibility, accountability, transparency, honesty and supervision.

Who will hold the two Judges accountable?

The story continues:

‘One day they said to each other,

“Let us go home, for it is time for lunch.”

So they both left and parted from each other. But turning back, they met again; and when each pressed the other for the reason, they confessed their lust.

Then together they arranged for a time when they could find her alone.’

Now the individuals become a predatory ring of two.

We recall that the Royal Commission in Australia gave details of predatory groups of church and institutional personnel.

The collusion, the shared evil.

Seeking opportunities.

Chapter 13 continues:

‘Once, while they were watching for an opportune day, she went in as before with only two maids, and wished to bathe in the garden, for it was a hot day.

No one was there except the two elders, who had hidden themselves and were watching her.

She said to her maids, “Bring me olive oil and ointments, and shut the garden doors so that I can bathe.” They did as she told them: they shut the doors of the garden and went out by the side doors to bring what they had been commanded; they did not see the elders, because they were hiding.

When the maids had gone out, the two elders got up and ran to her. They said, “Look, the garden doors are shut, and no one can see us. We are burning with desire for you; so give your consent, and lie with us.

If you refuse, we will testify against you that a young man was with you, and this was why you sent your maids away.” ’

She has been threatened by the evil within these two corrupt religious judges.
Not only by two men, but two men as religious judges, who can decide her future.
They can cover up their crime.

The two judges in their own dual roles as elders and judges can symbolise today both the sexual abuse perpetrators and the authorities who covered up their crimes.

Susanna’s thinking and her response is shared.
And feeling the groan within her.
Chapter 13 continues:

‘Susanna groaned and said, “I am completely trapped.
For if I do this, it will mean death for me;
if I do not, I cannot escape your hands.

I choose not to do it; I will fall into your hands,
rather than sin in the sight of the Lord.”

Then Susanna cried out with a loud voice, and the two elders shouted against her.
And one of them ran and opened the garden doors.’

Abusers believing that they can get away with it.
We have only to think of children and vulnerable adults who have been groomed and manipulated and seduced by trusted religious figures.
The abusers’ words and actions, wound and scar the very essence of their being.
Susanna will never be the same again.

And now we come to the reaction of people that know Susanna.

Who will stand up for her integrity?

And the role of shame?

A healthy or unhealthy shame.

‘the servants felt very much ashamed’

‘When the people in the house heard the shouting in the garden, they rushed in at the side door to see what had happened to her.
And when the elders told their story, the servants felt very much ashamed, for nothing like this had ever been said about Susanna.’

PROCESS

Now for the trial or tribunal or investigation or process.

Remembering again, they as judges pretend to be witnesses.

How does Susanna survive against this corrupt religious hearing?

We now come to another important point.

God cares for us.

God will invite people to speak up.

As in the sexual abuse crisis today, who has God prompted to speak up?

And where there has been silence and covering up, how did they deny their own spirituality by ignoring God's voice and/or choosing deliberately to put the image of the church first, above their conscience and what God wants them to do?

“The next day, when the people gathered at the house of her husband Joakim, the two elders came, full of their wicked plot to have Susanna put to death.

In the presence of the people they said,

“Send for Susanna daughter of Hilkiah, the wife of Joakim.”

So they sent for her.

And she came with her parents, her children, and all her relatives.

Now Susanna was a woman of great refinement and beautiful in appearance.

As she was veiled, the scoundrels ordered her to be unveiled,

so that they might feast their eyes on her beauty.

Those who were with her and all who saw her were weeping.’

And our own weeping for what survivors have been through.

And the importance of feeling for others.

“Then the two elders stood up before the people and laid their hands on her head.’

Once again abusing her very being.

“Through her tears she looked up toward Heaven, for her heart trusted in the Lord.’

And the tears of Susanna.

The tears of her family and friends.

We remember family and friends

who have been deeply affected by the church sexual abuse.

And the contrast once more –
Susanna stills lives her spirituality faithfully
‘Through her tears she looked up toward Heaven, for her heart trusted in the Lord.’

The Elders – no mention of a genuine relationship with God,
No mention of spirituality in them.

A contrast between spirituality and corruption.

‘The elders said, “While we were walking in the garden alone, this woman came in with two maids, shut the garden doors, and dismissed the maids.
Then a young man, who was hiding there, came to her and lay with her. We were in a corner of the garden, and when we saw this wickedness we ran to them.
Although we saw them embracing, we could not hold the man, because he was stronger than we, and he opened the doors and got away.
We did, however, seize this woman and asked who the young man was, but she would not tell us. These things we testify.” ‘

Because they were elders of the people and judges, the assembly believed them and condemned her to death.

The deep tragedy of not being believed.
A story told over and over again during the Royal commission.
Of the innocent not being believed.

Again, Susanna turns to God.

‘Then Susanna cried out with a loud voice, and said, “O eternal God, you know what is secret and are aware of all things before they come to be; you know that these men have given false evidence against me.
And now I am to die, though I have done none of the wicked things that they have charged against me!” ‘

God hears her prayerful cry.

DANIEL

God stirs a young lad named Daniel.

How?

‘God stirred up the holy spirit’ of young Daniel.

‘The Lord heard her cry.

Just as she was being led off to execution,
God stirred up the holy spirit of a young lad named Daniel, and he shouted with a loud voice,
“I want no part in shedding this woman’s blood!”

All the people turned to him and asked,
“What is this you are saying?” ‘

In the crimes of sexual abuse in the Church, who has taken their stand among the Church leaders, challenging the Church to examine and to learn the facts.

‘Taking his stand among them he said,
“Are you such fools, O Israelites, as to condemn a daughter of Israel without examination and without learning the facts?
Return to court, for these men have given false evidence against her.”
So all the people hurried back.’

CULTURAL CHANGE

In this passage we see a change of culture that effects religious leadership and decision-making. The elders invite young Daniel to sit among the decision makers and inform them. God called Daniel to come forward. The other Elders discerned that God was initiating Daniel’s stance. Daniel is invited to join the discernment process concerning Susanna and the Judges.

We are called to discern where God is calling us in order to change the culture and practice of the Church.

In Daniel’s case, there is **urgency** because Susanna could be executed.

In our case, we have heard so many cases of abuse in Australia.

There is **urgency** for cultural change in the church in Australia and internationally.

As the passage continues:

‘And the rest of the elders said to him,
“Come, sit among us and inform us, for God has given you the standing of an elder.”
Daniel said to them,
“Separate them far from each other, and I will examine them.” ’

We hear of the process that Daniel used.

Given the many advances in psychology and social sciences today, how do we better use current knowledge and skills in our own thinking and processes?

The People of God are to report such criminality immediately to the police.
We are to implement best practice safeguarding policies and procedures.
We are to change our culture where it causes such harm.

The story continues:

‘When they were separated from each other,
he summoned one of them and said to him,
“You old relic of wicked days, your sins have now come home,
which you have committed in the past,
pronouncing unjust judgments, condemning the innocent
and acquitting the guilty, though the Lord said,
‘You shall not put an innocent and righteous person to death.’
Now then, if you really saw this woman, tell me this:
Under what tree did you see them being intimate with each other?”
He answered, “Under a mastic tree.”
And Daniel said, “Very well! This lie has cost you your head,
for the angel of God has received the sentence from God
and will immediately cut[c] you in two.”

Then, putting him to one side, he ordered them to bring the other.
And he said to him, “You offspring of Canaan and not of Judah,
beauty has beguiled you and lust has perverted your heart.
This is how you have been treating the daughters of Israel,
and they were intimate with you through fear;
but a daughter of Judah would not tolerate your wickedness.
Now then, tell me:
Under what tree did you catch them being intimate with each other?”
He answered, “Under an evergreen oak.”
Daniel said to him, “Very well! This lie has cost you also your head,
for the angel of God is waiting with his sword to split you in two,
so as to destroy you both.” ’

This reflection does not advocate the death penalty, like the passage does.

But when will the People of God as a ‘whole assembly’ be able to raise a great shout and bless God?

“Then the whole assembly raised a great shout and blessed God, who saves those who hope in him. And they took action against the two elders, because out of their own mouths Daniel had convicted them of bearing false witness; they did to them as they had wickedly planned to do to their neighbor. Acting in accordance with the law of Moses, they put them to death. Thus innocent blood was spared that day.

Hilkiah and his wife praised God for their daughter Susanna, and so did her husband Joakim and all her relatives, because she was found innocent of a shameful deed. And from that day onward Daniel had a great reputation among the people.’

In this reflection the innocence of Susanna is key. She is saved from execution by Daniel’s intervention. The People of God too are called by God to intervene, to protect people and their dignity and rights.

We called by God.

At our very core as Christians, we are called to genuinely love God and to love our neighbour.

DAMAGE TO SELF-BELIEF & SPIRITUALITY

The two Judges tried to manipulate Susanna into giving consent to their evil intentions. As we reflect on their action, we understand that they also tried to damage what was sacred to her

- her own faith-filled spirit.
- her spirituality,
- her belief in herself,
- her belief in God.

The two Judges can also represent today those who have so damaged the trust and spirituality of children and vulnerable adults.

The physical, psychological and spiritual harm that has been done to people.

The terrible damage done by

- the perpetrators,
- those who didn’t believe the survivors when they came forward.
- the process when it doubted the stories and harm done
- the denials, the covering up and the transfers

LOUD CRY

The Church, as a whole, needs a genuine and loud cry to God.

In the story of Chapter 13, we are told about Susanna:

‘Then Susanna cried out with a loud voice, and the two elders shouted against her.’

Her cry was to God and to others.

The Judges try to drown out her plea to God and others.

They tried to overwhelm her voice, her prayer to God and plea to people nearby.

We are told about Daniel:

‘The Lord heard her cry.

Just as she was being led off to execution,

God stirred up the holy spirit of a young lad named Daniel, and he shouted with a loud voice,

“I want no part in shedding this woman’s blood!” ’

AUTHORITY & SPIRITUALITY

The title of this reflection is *‘Church Sexual Abuse, Authority & Spirituality’*.

We have seen the dual misuse of authority by the two Judges.

Misusing their authority with the intention of evil.

Misusing their authority to cover up their crime and lay the blame on the innocent.

Some of the governance issues in authority are mentioned above.

If not for God answering Susanna’s prayer through the intervention of Daniel, all the elders and supporters would have been complicit in the death of Susanna who was innocent.

There is the **contrast** between the authority of God and misuse of authority by the two Judges.

There is the **contrast** between spirituality and corruption.

There is the healthy **contrast** between the personal authorities of Susanna and Daniel.

Susanna, an adult, maintains her personal authority even though she is condemned initially.

Daniel helps by his intervention and personal authority.

For both of them, God is there.

There is the **contrast** between God’s continual love for us and the church’s damage to people’s lives.

As we, the People of God, include in our focus the need for recognition of spirituality, a deeper awareness is needed about the damage that sexual abuse can cause to a person's spirituality through self-doubt and isolation and shattered trust.

A spirituality that brings healing to self-doubt and isolation and inner suffering also needs to restore personal authority and identity.

Daniel is presented in the Book of Daniel as someone who listens to God. The example of Daniel can challenge us today.

NEW TESTAMENT

In the New Testament, we know that Jesus is innocent, yet he is persecuted and executed on the cross.

To Jesus we turn in prayer for our neighbours, who are **innocent** and have been abused as children and vulnerable adults.

The People of God can reflect more deeply about the **innocence** of Jesus, Our Saviour, in his suffering and healing within our Christian spirituality and self-identity.

I pray that these parallels to Susanna and Daniel might be helpful.

We turn to Jesus in prayer.

Amen.

Fr. Gerry Hefferan, 29 August 2018