***‘Of course, nothing like that happens here’.***

I’ve heard that said more times than I can count when raising the issue of Domestic Violence – perhaps most frequently in middle-class environments in a so-called ‘Christian’ country. Patronisingly, we read about cultures across the world in which women are treated with legalised and institutionalised attitudes which equate to slavery, and we are pleased that our own society doesn’t behave like that.

But it does. We just don’t like to talk about it.

We might not live in a culture when domestic violence is an accepted part of human relationships, but the figures are frightening. In 2024, in the UK, 6.6% of women and 3.0% of men experienced domestic abuse. This equates to an estimated 2.3 million adults. The figures in Ireland are even worse.

It is good to know that there are a number of organisations who are working hard to raise awareness of the issue and support for victims. The Mother’s Union RISE UP campaign, Women’s and Men’s Aid, The Restored project, Safe Space and a number of others are making significant contributions - and Governments are increasingly starting to address the issues with relevant legislation. We also look to the Church to exercise leadership – we own a Gospel Imperative to love and support our neighbour unconditionally, not just in words but in action.

However, good and necessary as it is to offer support to victims, it is equally important to look at and address the reason behind abusive behaviour, and in this regard I shall concentrate on causes of violence against women, being by far the most prevalent.

A large body of research tells us that there are many identified triggers: Substance abuse, Violent pornography, Social Network manipulation, Mental illness, A History of being abused, especially in Childhood.

None of which are excuses. Not everybody who has these experiences resorts to violence. Abuse is a choice, and we need to address why such choices are made.

We have to challenge the Church’s Patriarchal/ Traditional attitudes and perceptions of defined Gender roles; in essence, that women should be submissive and obedient to men, treated as little more than childbearing property in domestic service.

We therefore have to admit that the Bible, particularly the Old Testament, does not cover itself in glory with regards to attitudes and behaviours towards women. We look (in shame?) at Genesis 16; Genesis 34; Judges 19-21; Numbers 5; Hosea 1-3; Ezekiel 16; we could go on, and we haven’t even mentioned King David’s adulterous abuse of Bathsheba or the collateral damage of the ongoing territorial wars.

We might dismiss these stories as historically cultural and now inappropriate in our modern society – but often, where women are symbolically presented as Israel or Jerusalem, the unfaithful wife of a faithful God, the image is burnt deep into our psyche.

These misogynistic attitudes are still prevalent in New Testament times, for example in the stories of the woman caught in adultery about to be stoned (John 8:1-11); the woman rendered unclean with the issue of Blood (Matthew 9:20-22); the symbolic woman drunk with the blood of God’s people described in apocalyptic detail (Revelation 17:6-7).

Even Paul, with his ultra-orthodox background, seems to have trouble making his mind up about the role of women. 1 Corinthians 14:33–35 – *‘women are to keep quiet and ask their husbands to tell them what to think’.* 1 Timothy 2: 9-15 – *‘ I do not allow a woman to teach or exercise authority over a man, but to remain quiet… … women will be preserved through the bearing of children’.*

Then in Ephesians – that one-sided misquoted passage 5:24:*’wives submit to their husband’*, when not contextualised by 5:21 – *‘submit to one another.’*

In our Church marriage service, the sense of property continues to this day – who ***gives*** this woman in marriage to this man? Not to mention the vows:

Q. Love, Honour and ***Obey***?

A. a) Yes please

b) In your dreams, buster

It does seem that Paul changes his mind (if the above examples are not, as many scholars would maintain, post-Pauline additions to the pastoral letters). There are several references to Paul’s support for women’s ministry and leadership. Acts18:26 tells of Priscilla as Family head who teaches Apollos. Romans 16 describes Phoebe as a Deacon, Junia as an apostle. Euodia and Syntyche are described in Philippians as fellow workers in the Gospel, even though they are having a bit of a row (of course, that never happens in church leaders today…).

Paul’s attitudes are now longer informed by the books of the law with which he grew up – he is changed by his meeting on the Damascus Road. He now understands. Jesus’ example guides Paul’s behaviour, as it does ours.

Jesus meets and regards women as people of equal importance as men, much to the astonishment of His audience. Domestic relationships are not about one party being a doormat – instead, they are about having the grace to offer and accept mutual servant love. Trusting that the other will make decisions that puts you first and themselves last, following His sacrificial example.

Jesus trusts and respects women. Altogether, in the New Testament, He engages with women in over 20 conversations. And in none of them does He treat women as lesser beings.

Eventually, Paul is able to cast off the remnant of his cultural background. Galatians 3:28. *‘There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.’*

And this is the point.

Irrespective of gender, we **are** one in Gods sight, and as equals, every relationship demands equal respect. That respect must be learned; at the earliest age, children and young people must be helped to regard an abusive act as a failure to respect, not just of the victim; the choice to abuse another destroys the self-respect of the perpetrator too.

Respect and abuse are mutually incompatible.

It is important to understand this, and it is equally important to accept that men and women have different abilities and gifts – some unique, some shared. Mutual respect, mutual submission, does not mean the loss of those individual abilities and roles. The contributions of husband and wife, parent and child are complementary to the establishment of strong, healthy relationships, built on mutual equity – **not** equality. The distinction is important.

‘Equality’ means that everyone contributes the same, is treated the same and receives the same *irrespective* of need.

‘Equity’ means that everyone is respected for their contribution of what they are able to give and receive according to their *unique individual* need.

The quote "From each according to his abilities, to each according to his needs," is first attributed to Karl Marx. (It shouldn’t be, he was paraphrasing Acts 4:32-34). Marx was talking about economics. But the apostles were talking about respect.

Respect is key to addressing abuse. Respect is defined as ‘a feeling of deep admiration for someone or something elicited by their abilities, qualities, or achievements’. It recognises the individual value of others and needs to be learned from early childhood. It goes against the competitive nature of a fallen humanity, in which gender attributes are reinforced by socialisation practices that encourage ‘toxic masculinity’, encouraging boys to be assertive and aggressive, regarding girls simply as objects to be used, and is often the result of a feeling of inferiority and inadequacy, again formed at an early age. This movement, fuelled by targeted social media and unmoderated Internet sites is arguably the most serious threat to reducing gender-based violence against women and girls, and appears to be is closely linked to the more extreme right wing populist political leaderships across the world. The possibility of a US Presidential pardon for the convicted rapper Sean ‘Diddy’ Combs sends a signal that similar activity is totally acceptable in our society.

This ‘masculine’(?) behaviour is far removed from the ‘Muscular Christianity’ of Thomas Hughes ‘Tom Brown’s Schooldays’ and Eric Liddell’s ‘Chariots of Fire’, and it is unlikely that such Victorian-like themes would have any traction in contemporary society; however there are indications that positive role models make a significant contribution to young men developing healthy, respectful relationships. Such models are not only men – although fathers certainly have a major role to play – but strong wider family relationships (not necessarily only traditional ones) also have a significant influence.

St. Paul uses the metaphor of athletic prowess many times. Celebrities, especially sporting figures, can make influential contributions to the development of respectful relationships and equitable attitudes in the young, especially – but not exclusively – teenage boys. Well-known role models demonstrating high ethical standards and behaviours will help bring them to maturity.

But we can’t rely on others unless we aspire to do the same. In the end, each one of us has a God-given duty of commitment to the youth of our families, our neighbours and the world.

Jesus said, “Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these.”

He was speaking to me. And speaking to you.