

A Sermon for Safeguarding Sunday

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Text(s)

- Mark 13:1-8
- Daniel 12:1-3
- Hebrews 10:11-14[15-18]19-25

Part of the outworking of God's justice is for the church to draw alongside the weak, the poor, and the oppressed. Verse after verse in the prophets and Psalms clamours to say that the heart of God is to be seen, as Isaiah puts it, in rescuing the oppressed, defending the orphan, and pleading for the widow.

Two appointments back, I was the Minister of Cambourne Church in the Diocese of Ely. Cambourne was a fast-growing central new town filled with houses with freshly painted front doors that told a story of neatness and newness. However, all was not well in Cambourne and in other new housing communities like it, as behind one freshly painted door was a family living in comfort with their material needs satisfied, and behind another equally freshly painted door were concrete floors, sparse furnishings, empty fridges and people who slept on mattresses on floors.

The disciples saw the large stones and large buildings and were impressed. This passage in Mark 13 occurs towards the end of Jesus' earthly ministry. The temple the disciples were gazing at had already been destroyed twice and what the disciples were gazing at was the newly re-built temple. The temple stood as a testament to the glory of God, and it was little wonder the disciples were amazed. The large temple stones of biblical times might well translate into the shell of aesthetically pleasing developments where narratives can be told, that freshly painted doors tell of the absence of social needs. But behind such doors, life's fragility and frailty can be found.

We, the Church of England, have been found out this week things have happened behind our doors for which we must both lament and repent. Following the publication of the Makin review, we must again apologise to Survivors of church-related abuse and commit ourselves afresh on this Safeguarding Sunday to building a church with temple-sized bricks that is a place of safety and refuge for all people. At Derby Cathedral we feel this particularly acutely as we live out our vocation to be a Church of Sanctuary to people fleeing from violence and persecution.



Figure 1: Taken from newsweek.com

There's a powerful photo of Cardinal Bergoglio, who later became Pope Francis, dressed in his cardinal's robes, kneeling and kissing the feet of a disabled child in a wheelchair. That photo, which you can find if you look up this morning's sermon on the website, is a lesson in how power within the Church is only ever to be used for the service and blessing of others, particularly the vulnerable, and never, never used in the ways that people like John Smyth used power to attend to his interests and gratification at huge and traumatic cost to the vulnerable he abused. By making himself vulnerable kneeling before this child, Pope Francis sees the world from the perspective of the other – in this case, a terminally ill child. As Christians living out our faith in the Church of England, we need to reverse and break down the systems of power that perpetuate the abuse of others and humble ourselves by seeing the world – and indeed, the church we love, through the eyes of abuse survivors. Professor John Swinton, the theologian wrote '*looking at vulnerability from a position of power is very different to looking at it from a position of weakness and humility*'¹. Perhaps this week has taught us that there are many groups whom would find the church a safer community were we as the Church to humble ourselves and see things from the perspective of those groups.

In the Diocese of Derby, we have as our vision that the Kingdom of God is Good News for All. Safeguarding is not a bolt-on to realising this vision; it is the vision. Jesus consistently prioritises the needs of the vulnerable throughout the New Testament. In Matthew 18, Jesus places a child in the middle of a group of disciples and tells them '*Unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the Kingdom of Heaven. Therefore, whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the Kingdom of Heaven*'². Jesus' act in prioritising the child of the great and good and powerful was as

¹ <https://www.brf.org.uk/loving-the-vulnerable/>

² Matthew 18:3-5

revolutionary then as it is now. At the heart of the Christian faith is the desire that all people come to salvation in Jesus, but what we might not realise is that the Greek and Latin root of Salvation is *safekeeping*. Our vocation is to help people find safekeeping in Jesus.

Poem for Safeguarding Sunday: Safe

What does it mean to feel, and be, safe?

It's holding the hand of someone you love. Or a parent's magic kiss on a grazed knee. It's a baby sound asleep in a loving embrace. That's safe.

It's when you're wrapped up warm and tight, indoors on a dark and cold night, somewhere you know, somewhere that's comfortable, where you can just 'be'. That's safe.

It's knowing you're not on your own because there's someone there at the end of the phone, to call or to text when you're feeling alone. That someone you can always rely on, that shoulder to cry on when things get tough. That's safe.

Safe can be the shield, the defence, the fortress, a lighthouse guiding you through the storm, or the harbour offering protection when the seas get rough.

Or safe can be that big red traffic sign that says stop, there's danger ahead.

And isn't that what the church is called to be? A refuge for the refugee, a sanctuary for the broken. A space for the hurting to find healing, a place for the last, the least, the lost, those on the margins and those in the centre, a place to find meaning. For God's eternal banner over me and you is love. And there is no fear in love for His perfect love casts out all fear and is safe.

We've not lived up to that expectation, we've fallen short, instead we've prioritised our own reputation, and if that's not cause for lamentation, I don't what is.

I don't mean to be the voice of condemnation; It's just time to prioritise the conversation. Giving space for those who need to, to share, to be believed, be renewed and find restoration.

If those things that were once kept out of sight, and covered up, are brought into the open. And we make space for the unspeakable things to be spoken. Their power can be broken.

Because a church that faces its shortcomings, and gives space to listen, reflects something of the kingdom of God. A church which truly loves is a church striving to be safe.

So it's time to put safeguarding on the church's agenda, to change the culture of yesterday, to pause and remember. Because safe is bold, it's the firm foundation beneath our feet, it means we can stand and take the leap of faith to have those conversations and be a church that's safe.³

Amen.

³ <https://safeguardingsunday.org/media/plcdrunf/safe-spoken-word.pdf>