

Sunday 26 November 2023 – Safeguarding Sunday

This is the last Sunday of the liturgical year, marked by the Feast of Christ the King. It is also the Sunday that we have chosen to mark as ‘Safeguarding Sunday’. Sue Hammersley examines what that means in a Christian community.

Readings:

Ezekiel 34.11-16; Matthew 25.31-end

Sermon: Safeguarding in a Christian Community – Sue Hammersley

Today, the last Sunday of the liturgical year, is when the Church celebrates Christ as King. Here at St Mark’s we are also marking ‘Safeguarding Sunday’.

The language of governance is significant when we are considering the importance of safeguarding within our churches. We’ve heard too much about how children and people who are vulnerable have suffered at the hands of those they should have been able to trust or be protected from. When we don’t have robust systems in place, those who pose the greatest risk to vulnerable people find a way through, with devastating effect.

Historically our churches have not listened properly to the voice of the victim and survivor; we have been unwilling to believe that trusted men and women in positions of leadership could perpetrate such acts. But what we are learning is that for churches and communities to be truly safe from the predatory and harmful behaviours of a few, every single one of us needs to be alert and prepared to voice our concerns. In one of the most influential cases of our time, Victoria Climbié’s death in 1999, a case in which multiple agencies were condemned by Lord Laming for their failure to act, a church community could also have intervened and protected this vulnerable child.

Although our church appoints people with specific responsibilities for safeguarding, each of us contributes to making the environment safer for all. In order to create the safest possible community and culture we must look out for the signs and indicators of risk and harm and be prepared to take action, to speak out, and report even the smallest concerns in the right ways and to the right people.

Safeguarding is often associated with processes and procedures, background checks, training and policies but at its heart are the Christian values which ensure that everyone is valued and no one finds themselves at risk from being in church.

As we consider what it means to be under the rule of God we might name a number of values – love and dignity, security and courage, justice and responsibility...

Rather than elevating Jesus to a position of authority which is out of reach, you might like to consider what it means for Jesus' authority to have integrity, to give us confidence, to allow us room to experiment and grow whilst providing boundaries which protect us from our own egos. After the service you might like to consider what the 'kingdom of God' might look like.

In our first reading, from the prophet Ezekiel, we hear that, as a shepherd, God actively seeks out the sheep who have been scattered...

Our churches are meant to be safe places but they are full of broken people so sometimes we will experience something which is concerning. At first we can feel scattered, like those sheep; we might feel like leaving the church altogether and some people do. Perhaps this has been your story or perhaps you know someone in this position. So the first thing to say is that God is so much bigger than the church. Even when the church is the problem or part of the problem, God will not abandon you. God will search you out and guide you towards safe places where you will be nourished.

I will seek the lost, and I will bring back the strayed, and I will bind up the injured, and I will strengthen the weak, but the fat and the strong I will destroy. I will feed them with justice.

When the church has good safeguarding in place then even if someone in the church is causing harm, it should be very clear who you can talk to about it. We have posters around church with the photos of our safeguarding team but this is where every single person plays their part because you might be the one who notices something, you might be the person someone chooses to confide in. Trust your instincts and speak to

someone who can help, either a member of the clergy or our Safeguarding Officer. Please don't assume that it is already known about and please don't try to deal with it yourself. If possible note down your concern, date and time it and pass it on to the safeguarding team.

In church we want to emphasise God's unconditional love, we don't want to believe that bad things happen, but we know that they do.

Scripture is full of God's judgement. The problem is that God's judgement is then directed by our institutions towards the wrong situations. Who says that God is interested in people's love lives? It seems to me that God is interested in the responsibilities of those who have power over others. God is interested in the way we speak about each other, because careless words can be really damaging. God is interested in the authority of religious leaders because they can bring people closer to God or drive such a wedge between us and God that people lose their way.

God's judgement is against those who don't look after the most vulnerable in society. Why do we hear so much about sin and yet speak out so little against the structures which make people suffer?

Our Gospel reading this morning labours the point. There are those who care for people without ever expecting a reward, they just naturally care for those who are in need. These, righteous people, will find their reward because they are aligned with God, the source and fulfilment of love.

Those whose hearts are hardened to people in need, well, they have created such a distance from the God who loves them that they are already in their own kind of hell – a separation from the God who desires right relationships between people.

We are not meant to be uncritical – no, we are not meant to act as judge and jury but we need to be curious, we need to ask why someone seems uncomfortable in a particular situation, why we feel ill-at-ease about what is being said; we need to trust our instincts and be discerning.

This is very difficult for good upstanding Christians who don't like to make a fuss, who don't want to get someone into trouble, who don't want to jump to the wrong conclusions... We don't want to create a culture of

suspicion and false accusations but we do need to invest in a church which faces the reality that someone who is abusive will find the people who are not as well protected as they need to be.

In the last few weeks we've heard parables about the wedding banquet, the wise and foolish virgins, the stewardship of talents and today the sheep and the goats. In each story there's a judgement, an ethical separation between those who have made good choices and those who have not.

These parables teach us that our choices have consequences, although we often have to work quite hard to decide what they're teaching us! For those of us who are seeking first the kingdom of God we know that we will fall short of God's image in us (sin) and we know that God is calling us to turn our lives around again and again so that we can be the people God knows we can be.

The parables are meant to confuse and disturb us so that we will continue to look for better interpretations.

Does it matter who are the sheep and the goats or is it more important to consider who are the hungry, thirsty and naked, the stranger, the sick and the prisoner? Rather than thinking about whether we are God's chosen sheep perhaps we need to get on with small acts of kindness which no one will ever notice.

John Wesley summed up Jesus' teaching when he said, 'Do all the good you can, by all the means you can, in all the ways you can, in all the places you can, at all the times you can, to all the people you can, as long as ever you can'. Doing that with a heart for God, doing that with a heart for the vulnerable, doing that in the safest possible way. That's safeguarding.

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