

Sunday 24 November 2024 – ‘Christ the King, Safeguarding, and Stewardship’ – Beth Keith

This is the last Sunday after Pentecost and the Feast of Christ the king. Beth Keith links the festival with the issues of safeguarding and stewardship.

Readings:

Daniel: 7, 9-10; 13-14. Luke: 10, 25-37.

Sermon: Christ the King, Safeguarding, and Stewardship’- Beth Keith

“The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice.” Throughout Barak Obama’s campaign and presidency, he often quoted this saying from Martin Luther King Jr. The quote was so important to him that he had it literally woven into a rug in the Oval Office. Taken in context, Dr. King’s actually wrote. “Evil may so shape events that Caesar will occupy a palace and Christ a cross, but that same Christ will rise up and split history into A.D. and B.C., so that even the life of Caesar must be dated by his name. Yes, the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice.’

Today is the festival of Christ the King. This festival is well summed up by Luther King’s quote. On this day, the church remembers the kingdom of which Jesus spoke. A kingdom of justice, a kingdom which ultimately triumphs. Today the powerful may sit on thrones. Today the weak and vulnerable may be oppressed. But this is not the end of the story.

The last couple of weeks have been a time of reckoning and judgement for the Church of England. The current safeguarding scandal is not the first and will not be the last. The bravery and commitment of victims and survivors to speak out, and the reporting by Kathy Newman and Channel 4, ensured that these abuses would not remain covered up. And that the church would be held accountable for personal, collective, and institutional failings.

Andrew Graystone, whom you may have seen on *Newsnight* or heard on the radio, over the past few weeks, wrote a paper called *Falling Among Thieves*. In which, he compares the story of the Good Samaritan, to the commonly reported experiences from victims of church-based abuse. ‘A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell into the hands of robbers, who stripped him, beat him, and went away, leaving him half dead. Now by chance a priest was going down that road; and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. So likewise, a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. But a Samaritan while travelling came near him; and when he saw him, he was moved with pity. He went to him and bandaged his wounds, having poured oil and wine on them. Then he put him on his own animal, brought him to an inn, and took care of him. The next day he took out two denarii, gave them to the innkeeper, and said, “Take care of him; and when I come back, I will repay you whatever more you spend”’.

Victims and survivors often report the pain they experience when they try to report what has happened. When disclosing abuse, they expect the church to respond, but instead priests, bishops, and church lawyers, have done the equivalent of deliberately walking past on the other side of the road. In some cases, going further than deliberately walking away, and instead blaming the victims for the abuse, and siding with the perpetrators. Survivors talk of how the pain of the initial abuse, was compounded by the response of the church. The church who they had expected to be just, good, and kind. It had seemed almost unbelievable to them, that the church might cross the road and look away. And instead, they found good Samaritans far away from the church in journalists, lawyers, police officers, and therapists who helped them to safety and helped them to heal.

It can be tempting to treat abusive behaviour as one rotten apple, to focus on the specific individuals directly involved, once they're moved on the problem disappears. Or to think that the resignation of the archbishop means the church is now fine. After all he took the hit, and we can carry on as normal.

The Makin review showed, as previous safeguarding reviews have shown, that church culture, theological beliefs, and institutional responses all contributed to these situations in which abuse was allowed to thrive. Lisa Oakley, professor of safeguarding at Chester University has spent the last twenty years researching church-based abuse, and looking at how church cultures can fall on a spectrum of healthy, through to unhelpful, to unhealthy, and then to abusive. With those further down the spectrum become increasingly dangerous and damaging, and more at risk of being churches where abuse can thrive.

It is well known that lots of people come to St Mark's, choosing this church after having had bad experiences in other churches. For some this is the relatively milder experience of an unhelpful or unhealthy church culture. For others it has been the experience of spiritually abusive practices, and others have experienced other types of abuse.

We know that a number of churches nearby have been investigated for unhealthy and abusive practices. The investigations which had been made public include a variety of church traditions; Fulwood, a conservative evangelical church; The Crowded House, a free independent evangelical church. The 9 o'clock service, with charismatic roots, and more recently Network Church Sheffield. And at the other end of the scale Sheffield Cathedral with its progressive Catholic tradition. You may know people who have been impacted by institutional practices and responses, or by individual perpetrators. You may have been affected yourself, by these or other experiences, which have not become public, but are no less real.

When we asked on the stewardship questionnaire, why you'd come to St Marks, we expected people would mention bad experiences in another church as the reason they came here. But even so, the stewardship group were surprised at how many people gave that reason. Some years ago, before I came to St Mark's, I had my own experience which could be described like the man on the road to Jericho. After the equivalents of the priest and the Levite walked past deliberately crossing to the other side. I was picked up by my Samaritans, and amongst those who supported me and help me to safety, there were three members of St Marks. Who unknown to each other played their part in getting me to safety and helping me to recover. How lovely then, some years later to come here to minister, and now to be becoming your vicar.

St Mark's has been, and continues to be a place, like the inn, where those who have been wounded on the road can find safety, sustenance, and healing. And perhaps there are those among us, travelling the roads, ready to stop and pick up those who have been injured and carry them to safety. So, what should our response be to all this?

Firstly, we should not be complacent. Good safeguarding in church means creating a safe environment where everyone feels protected and respected. This involves clear policies, regular training, and having designated safeguarding officers, who can respond to any concerns. It's about fostering a culture of care, where people know how to report issues and feel confident, they will be handled with compassion and respect.

Secondly, as we think about what it means to be a safer and healthy church, it's important that we continue to value transparency and care. That we continue to foster openness, and space where questions can be asked without fear, and every voice can be valued. That the PCC, take governance seriously, that we are transparent and accountable in our decision-making.

Thirdly, I wonder if it is time that we explore further what our role and gift to the wider Church might be. If St Mark's has been like the inn, a safe place to heal, can we help other churches to become places of safety too?

The Makin report, like various other safeguarding reports, notes that the theology of the church contributed to the culture that enabled unhealthy and abusive behaviours to develop. Safeguarding reports often stop at this point, not wanting to evaluate why the particular theology enabled the abuse. Perhaps it's unsurprising, as those qualified to undertake safeguarding reviews, are less likely to also be qualified to engage in theological critique. This leaves many questions hanging. But we have done some of this theological and pastoral work. Are there ways in which we can play a fuller part in this Diocese and beyond, in sharing what we have learnt, and what we have become.

At our APCM, earlier in the year, there was an interesting discussion on how we spend our finances, and what we give to the Diocese. Many of us have questions about whether we should be funding the Diocesan strategy of church planting, which seems to also involve the proliferation of conservative theology across the Diocese. But it was also clear that we also want to play our diocesan part, supporting other churches, and particularly those churches in more deprived areas. Next term, the PCC are starting to think through what comes next. How do we want to spend our resources? What will that look like here? How will we play our part in the Diocese, what is St Mark's contribution to the wider church further afield.

Practically speaking, it really helps us to plan, if we know what giving we can expect over the coming year. But, this is much more than practical planning. Over the past few weeks, we have together explored some of the core values of St Mark's and heard from a variety of people, about what they value about this church. Given the state of the Church of England at the moment, it feels impertinent to be asking you to give. I hope that over these weeks, you have heard stories you can connect with. Others who share your experience, or the reasons you came and chose to stay here. I hope today gives you another reason. If like so many others you have benefitted from the safety of this church, please help us to continue to be that place for others.

If you don't give regularly because you've never got round to it, I'm saying today's the day. If you don't give much because you think St Mark's doesn't need it, I'm telling you that we do. If you don't give a lot because you don't have a lot, your giving something is an example to everyone else. If you don't give more because no one's ever said thank you, I am sorry. Thank you for all that you do and all that give.

'A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell into the hands of robbers, who stripped him, beat him, and went away, leaving him half dead. At the end of the story, Jesus asked: 'Which of these three men, do you think, was a neighbour to the man?' And he said, 'The one who showed him mercy.' Jesus said to him, 'Go and do likewise.'

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