

Sermon preached at Wymondham Abbey

Sunday November 17th 2024: **Safeguarding Sunday**

As he came out of the temple, one of his disciples said to him, 'Look, Teacher, what large stones and what large buildings!' Then Jesus asked him, 'Do you see these great buildings? Not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down.'

When he was sitting on the Mount of Olives opposite the temple, Peter, James, John, and Andrew asked him privately, 'Tell us, when will this be, and what will be the sign that all these things are about to be accomplished?' Then Jesus began to say to them, 'Beware that no one leads you astray. Many will come in my name and say, "I am he!" and they will lead many astray. When you hear of wars and rumours of wars, do not be alarmed; this must take place, but the end is still to come. For nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom; there will be earthquakes in various places; there will be famines. This is but the beginning of the birth pangs. Mark 13.1-8

As we've watched the news over the last week, culminating in the resignation of the Archbishop of Canterbury, we'd be forgiven for thinking that Jesus' apocalyptic words have been ringing all too true. *Not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down.*

He was talking about the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple, which happened forty years later - but like everything Jesus said, it is layered with meaning. Everything he says resonates forward into our own times. And so as we see the stories of terrible abuse and the outrage they provoke and the hunt for culprits surging towards the top of the headlines, we might well begin to have apocalyptic thoughts. Will the Church (and more importantly the life of faith in this country) be thrown down in ruins?

It's providential (and I mean providential, not 'a horrible coincidence') that today is designated Safeguarding Sunday in the Church of England's calendar. Over the last twenty years or so the Church has taken an approach to safeguarding, with training courses and staffing structures and a great suite of resources, which has developed exponentially. This has been in the context of similar work in many other spheres of life, organisations or activities wherever the safety and care and protection of young people and vulnerable adults has come into sharp focus.

You don't need me to tell you why this has happened, but the events of the last week remind us. Abuse, in all its forms (physical, sexual, emotional, spiritual and neglect) was simply not taken sufficiently seriously, whatever the magnitude of it. Occasionally a case would be properly dealt with, but all too often a report of abuse would either not be believed at all, or not thought that important, or suppressed or hushed up for fear of the institution's reputation or because the alleged perpetrator was a figure of authority, perhaps much loved or respected – or just untouchably powerful.

The case which has led to Justin Welby's resignation was an extreme one. Whatever you make of what you have seen reported this last week, however fair or unfair the things being said to and about the archbishop, there is no escaping the disgraceful way in which for years Church leaders ignored or hid or simply exported John Smyth's abuse. The fact that this has only now come to a head, when it was first recognised as an issue in the 1980's, is pretty extraordinary. It seems scandalous, really.

And the circumstances of the abuse lend extra layers of either distaste (to the sensitive observer) or frisson (to journalists and commentators). I'm taking about the social setting of the abuse, especially the so-called Christian camps. These were specifically aimed at public schoolboys, complete with faux military organisation.

The social snobbery and self-importance of this are bad enough from a Christian perspective. But worse was the harsh, exclusive, dogmatic and aggressively evangelistic tone of the whole thing. For many participants (admittedly not all) as they looked back, it was almost like a cult.

If I sound distressed or even angry about this, it's because I am. I have in recent years spent time with someone who experienced the camps, and what he was able to tell me was just

upsetting. There are people who had no experience of John Smyth himself, but who have still been deeply damaged by their experience of the camps.

Earlier I mentioned journalistic frisson at all this, and whether we thought the archbishop was being fairly treated in the media. One thing that has really bothered me this last week is seeing certain church figures popping up in interviews and attacking him. This has bothered me for two reasons. First - in some cases I know that some of those people were attacking him because they were already set against him over other issues. In other words, they were being disingenuous, using the abuse scandal, weaponizing it, to try to bring him down.

And second - it bothered me because this has all given a really misleading picture, both of the specifics of the case; and also – perhaps more importantly – of how the Church is actually doing in the whole area of safeguarding. The mere fact that the Archbishop had to resign over this shows how far the Church has come in its safeguarding regime. It wouldn't have happened twenty years ago; and Justin Welby has played an important part in the development of that regime.

I'm saying this by way of encouragement here, now, for you. It is simply not fair for people, especially bishops, to say that the Church is 'not a safe place'. Because while there are cases large and small which have not or not yet been well dealt with, the overall culture of safeguarding in the Church is better than ever it was – and the work being done to maintain the momentum of improvement is really tremendous. I've done enough safeguarding training to see how it has deepened and improved over the years. There are highly motivated, highly skilled and tirelessly hard-working people in every diocese and every parish doing their best to make things better and safer and healthier and fairer. That includes Diana here, whose quiet, assiduous work in the background is vital to our part in this quest.

I imagine this has been a tough listen, but I felt I needed to tackle it head-on. Partly to acknowledge the horror of the specific Smyth case and all other such cases; but also to give us a sense of perspective. Without of course ever being remotely complacent, we should acknowledge the good work that is being done. That good work is the responsibility of all of us, because it is best done at our ground level. It's part of our daily life as followers of Jesus: doing our little best to be more and more like him, seeing the him in others, and taking seriously not just his command to love, but his specific command to care for children.

On one training course we were asked to reflect on Psalm 91, which begins like this:

*You who live in the shelter of the Most High,
who abide in the shadow of the Almighty,
2 will say to the Lord, 'My refuge and my fortress;
my God, in whom I trust.'
3 For he will deliver you from the snare of the fowler
and from the deadly pestilence;
4 he will cover you with his pinions,
and under his wings you will find refuge;
his faithfulness is a shield and buckler.
5 You will not fear the terror of the night,
or the arrow that flies by day,
6 or the pestilence that stalks in darkness,
or the destruction that wastes at noonday.*

Our calling, our participation in the work of God in the world, is to offer those wings of shelter to the young and the vulnerable, and protect them from fear and terror.

And as we know, *perfect love casts out fear*. Let love be what triumphs here.