

Holy Trinity Sunningdale
Sunday, November 19, 2023 (Safeguarding Sunday)
Readings – Isaiah 41:10-13 & Mark 12:28-31

Today is designated Safeguarding Sunday to give us an opportunity to examine and reflect on the safeguarding culture in our churches. What has happened and is still happening in our churches is a sad account of woeful abuse of those who are not in a position to defend themselves. When we hear the stories of how the Church got it wrong and people have been harmed, it is easy to become overwhelmed thinking how or why could so much evil happen among God's people?

Often, I am asked, why I choose to be part of the church an organisation with a track record of failures, an organisation which has caused so much injustice, pain and suffering globally. My response always is, people fail, people cause pain and suffering, not God. God chose Israel to represent him to the world, they failed to do this. Likewise, the church is filled with people God has called but often, like Israel, we fail. The church is the body of Christ – his hands, his feet, his voice and we are filled with his Spirit. But, when we choose to do our own will instead of God's will, then we fail God and we fail people. When evil happens and people are harmed or abused, it is humans – people like you and I who failed and not God. God is not distant or detached from pain and suffering. He sees and understands pain and suffering – in Jesus, we worship a God who suffered and died for us.

Through Isaiah, God says, "For I am the LORD your God who takes hold of your right hand and says to you, Do not fear; I will help you." These words of comfort were spoken to Israel in captivity because they had failed God. Yet, God in his mercy reassures them of his love and salvation. The same promise is for us. As God's people, instead of being dismayed by the state of the Church or the situation of our world, we need not fear because God is with us and he gives us assurance of his help.

Safeguarding Sunday is a good time to pause and reflect on what safeguarding really is. What does it mean to keep people safe? Who is vulnerable among us? We will all be vulnerable at some stage in our lives, some of us for much longer and some more obviously than others. Safeguarding is everyone's responsibility. It's about building a healthy culture in our church that encourages honesty and openness, where each individual is respected, valued and nurtured and where leaders are nurturing and nurtured. And all of us are tasked with being aware of other people's needs and vulnerabilities. Safeguarding is also about making sure the people that act on behalf of the church are appropriate and the right people to do so – and that's crucial because, sadly, not everybody has God's love as a motive.

Today we celebrate the things we're already doing to make our church a safer place. We celebrate our Parish Safeguarding Officer – Becky Meadows, who works hard in the background to ensure all processes and procedures are in place. We also must consider what more can be done. As we acknowledge the vast improvements on safeguarding awareness, the policies and procedures in place to protect the vulnerable and make our churches safer today, we also need to recognise how central to our faith safeguarding is.

In Mark 12, Jesus says the 'most important commandment' is to love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength and the second is to love your neighbour as yourself. Jesus then says, "There is no commandment greater than these". Jesus is saying that we cannot

choose one without the other. In other words, there is no divide – we cannot give our love to God and then forget about loving people. Jesus ties loving God and loving our neighbour inextricably together. That is what is and should be at the heart of safeguarding for us as Christians – loving others as we love God. As Christians we must love and care for our neighbours. As a church we must ensure that it is done safely.

John Wesley summed up the words of Jesus 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! May God’s love flow through us to others especially those who are vulnerable and those who are suffering. Amen.

Dolapo Ogunbawo