

A Sermon at the Service of Thanksgiving for the Ministry of Safeguarding Officers – Carlisle Cathedral – Oct 24

Passages – Isaiah 1.11-17 ; Mark 5.21-43

Thank you all for being here today. And thank you for the vitally important role which you, and so many others, play in helping our churches to be safer. I also want to take this moment to recognise and give thanks for the work of Jo, our DSA, Alan, our Diocesan Safeguarding Advisory Panel Chair (indeed, all those who serve on that panel) who give so much, who go above and beyond to help us do better and to embed a better culture across this diocese.

We are on a long journey with this. Much has been done and much is still left to do, but it is a vital work. I do often hear people's frustrations and doubts about safeguarding – that there is too much bureaucracy, or that people feel the weight of this responsibility. I recognise that people are burdened with lots of things, and because it is such a responsibility this can feel like a task and weight too far. I'd want to say that something else needs to give. It can't be this because this is about caring for people. It is about church being a place where people are valued, loved and safe. That is not as easy as simply being nice to people. It is about taking care, putting things in place, growing in and living a culture which protects people. I have spent too much time with people who have suffered abuse, as children or adults, for me to think of this as all too much bureaucracy. The damage we can do to each other, with lifelong effects, is enormous. Safeguarding is about taking human beings, and our ability for evil, seriously and also about being a place where the grace, forgiveness and healing of Jesus is known and experienced. The role of the Parish Safeguarding Officer in this is vital. You are not the box ticker who has to get people to do things. You are fulfilling a vital ministry of care and compassion, a difficult and demanding brief which will make a deep and important difference in the spiritual life of God's church here in Cumbria. The church does have a long way to go with this. We have failed too often in the past and we can't just expect to say, "We've learned lessons," and be allowed to just carry on. We need to sit with our failures, lament what we have done and its consequences until such time as we have shown ourselves truly to have learnt through the way we do things now, until those who have been most hurt give their consent. Again, your role in that is so very important. Thank you.

These passages today underpin all this.

The heart of God is for the orphan and the widow, for those who are vulnerable to the mistreatment of the powerful and influential. The command of God to his people is that care for those who are vulnerable is the most important evidence and act of worship. "If you love me," God says, you will care for those who need care. You will protect them from the powerful who would use them. God does not mince his words in this. "Don't bother with all your fancy services, about getting the words and the seasons right! Don't bring me this, that and the other offering! No. Learn to do right. Seek Justice. Defend the oppressed. Take up the cause of the fatherless and plead the cause of the widow." The worship of God's people is, therefore, bound up in how we care for those who are neglected - those who are seen, known and loved by our heavenly Father. Our prayers and praises must be reflected in our care for others, particularly those who are vulnerable. Making our churches safe places for all is a vital part of our worship of our holy God. In the light of this passage, can we still worry about making sure there is a communion service each Sunday and complain about our safeguarding training?

Over many months we have been dealing with harrowing stories from those who lived at St Monica's Mother and Baby home in Kendal. Although there are stories of great care for vulnerable mothers and children, there are distressing tales of cruelty and carelessness. Young mothers filled with shame, young babies taken away without goodbyes, disabled children not given the care and dignity they deserved. This was before our time, but our neighbours have lived with the consequences of these

things for their whole lives – shame, regret, longing, pain – caused by an organisation that should have shown them the deep, healing, hope-filled love of God in Jesus Christ.

We have this direct command, that the character of God's people is tested by our care for those who are most vulnerable and we have the example of our Lord who brought healing and hope to those who believed they had none.

This passage from Mark might seem a strange one to draw on for a service around safeguarding, but it holds out the hope that only Jesus can bring, the heart of God for the world and the hope and healing of his kingdom.

A woman who has lived with the pain and weakness of bleeding for many years manages to catch the hem of Jesus' garment in her desperate faith that even this slight touch will bring her the healing she craves. Her condition has not just caused physical pain but has brought her shame and exclusion so that she doesn't feel able to talk to him directly. "If I just touch him," she thinks, "Maybe I will be well." Sensing her faith through her touch, he turns and she receives the full care and attention of the Son of the living God.

Jesus is on the way to a seemingly hopeless case. Jairus' daughter is sick and, by the time he gets there, she is beyond everyone's reach. When Jesus says that she's just sleeping, they scorn him. "There's nothing you can do for her now. You're too late." Jesus ignores their obvious common sense and reasonable lack of hope. He goes to sit with her. "Talitha koum! Little girl, get up!" And she gets up. What seemed beyond hope, is healed and restored.

The pain and damage which abuse can cause, which goes so deep and causes such trauma and shame, is not beyond the healing of Jesus. Lifelong pain, trauma and shame, situations which people so often feel cannot be revealed and healed, can be transformed by our living, loving Saviour. In the midst of despair, God reaches in and brings hope and restoration. The one whose heart is towards the vulnerable is also the one who can heal. No one, and no one's situation, is beyond his loving attention and the hope and healing that he gives. No one needs to touch his garment in a crowd because they are unworthy of his attention. No one is so sick that they are beyond his reach and new life.

Friends, you are doing work which God honours, to make his church safe for all who seek and need him. We might have a long way to go, but we are committed to it because in doing this we are seeking to love the Lord with all our heart and mind and strength, **and** loving those he sends us to. And whilst we have a long way to go, we do so knowing what God is like and that God can heal any situation.

No past, no pain, no shame is too great to be healed by him who says, "Come to me, and I will give you rest."

Amen.