

Under God's care and protection

A sermon preached by Revd Viv Bridges on Safeguarding Sunday 10 October 2021

Readings: Amos 5.6-7, 10-15; Psalm 91 (Whoever dwells in the shelter of the most High); Hebrews 4.12-16; Luke 10.25-37 (The Good Samaritan)

Not all that long ago there were heavy sighs and groans whenever the word 'safeguarding' was mentioned.... including from me! Part of this was because it seemed just another bit of 'bureaucracy', more paperwork and part was because it seemed to include the implication that I personally couldn't be trusted not to abuse someone. But I think things have changed.

We may still groan a bit about the time involved in doing safeguarding training, but I think we all accept the need to learn about safeguarding. Not because we aren't trustworthy ourselves, but because we have seen so many distressing incidents where even those most trusted in an institution/group have taken advantage of that trust in order to satisfy their own desires, and this has simply not been noticed, or has been allowed to continue because of fear on the part of those around the situation. We are still aghast at the case of Sarah Everard, and on Thursday there was a programme about Jimmy Saville (mindboggling in how much he did, but more so in how he was allowed to get away with it).

Our readings today remind us, perhaps, that in some ways, life doesn't change. Our Old Testament and Gospel readings remind us that human nature doesn't really change. There has always been an inherent capacity for cruelty – for satisfying one's own desires by 'trampling on the poor'. But there is also an inherent capacity for great kindness – for going out of one's way to help those in need.

Our Psalm and Epistle remind us that God's nature doesn't change. God is unfailingly CARING and loving. Through his Son, Jesus Christ, God experienced what it is to be vulnerable, weak, to be tested. So, he understands us. And he longs to gather each and every one of us under the shadow of his wing, to look after and care for us. But God also gave us free will, and so there will always be those who thwart God's purpose of love and care by trampling on those more vulnerable than themselves.

Part of our duty as Christians is to be like that Good Samaritan: to go out of our way to help the vulnerable, not just stand by, watch, and walk past, to play our part in making God's desire to care and shelter his people a REALITY. Sadly, we know that very often people who call themselves Christian, and, indeed, the Church itself, have failed in this duty of care. We read and see reports of these failures all too often – priests, monks and nuns who have used the fact that they were 'trusted', simply because of their position, to take advantage of people they were meant to be caring for.

Sadly, in safeguarding, as in other areas, the church as an institution lags behind secular Society. And this particularly tragic, because there is an expectation that those who say they try to live according to Christ's values, will look after all those in their care in a very special way. I believe that, in Society as a whole, we live in an exciting age, of great hope.

Of course, things still go wrong all the time. Human nature doesn't change, and so there is still much abuse and cruelty, but these things are more and more rejected by society at large. We now have laws that make it illegal to discriminate against people because of age, colour, creed, gender, sexuality and so on. The definition of 'abuse' now recognises that this can be so much more than just physical abuse. Opportunities are opening up in such an exciting way for those who are physically or mentally different from what we have presumed to call 'normal'. All this has happened in a comparatively very short time...we only have to watch TV programmes set back in the 50s, 60s

to be reminded of what life was like for homosexuals, people with learning or physical disabilities, for women, and so on.

So secular society has moved a long way, but abuse still continues, and society is beginning to realise that it's no use just making laws and defining processes. It's necessary to change people's beliefs and values because these are what truly affect the way people behave. Changes are much more effective if people do things, not because they will get into trouble if they don't, but because they have an inner drive and motivation to behave in a particular way. It seems to me that, as Christians, we already have that internal drive and motivation – God's commandments to love our neighbours, but, as I mentioned, we have lagged behind in putting the processes into place. And the church is trying to put this right. It recognises that it has a great deal to do to make sure it is carrying out its duty to be 'as Christ' to all it ministers to.

In its web pages about safeguarding the Church of England says: *"The Church has an ambition to make a paradigm shift in its relationship with safeguarding. This requires recognition that safeguarding needs to move away from something that is in some respects external / imposed upon the Church, to something that flows from within the soul of the Church.*

It continues, *"Safeguarding is (and I assume this is because of our belief in God's care for us) at the centre of our faith, in our practice, in our worship, in our praying, and in our believing. Safeguarding needs to become integral to the very DNA of the Church rather than an appendage, with good safeguarding behaviours flowing naturally and intuitively.*

This isn't the case yet, and this is why we are taking the trouble to reach out to try to ensure that this is seen as a personal message to every member of the church – that's you and me. And I'm absolutely certain that creating this heart and soul approach to looking after our neighbours is something that we all want to do and something that we all have the potential to do. But 'potential' needs developing, nurturing, and this happens when we open ourselves to that safeguarding learning I've mentioned.

Such learning, or training, helps us in a number of ways: -

- It increases our ability to be aware of signs that might indicate that someone we know is being abused when something is just 'not right';
- It increases our awareness of our own actions. People have very different life experiences, which means that not everyone will understand some of the things we do. Giving someone a hug may seem a natural expression of affection and kindness to us, but to someone else it may be distressing – a threat, a reminder of something painful in their past.

This learning also widens our understanding of the term 'vulnerable'. We may be tempted to think that the people we meet can't possibly be vulnerable, but it's not just the very young, or very old, those with disabilities of some sort, mental or physical, who are vulnerable. There will be times when, because of illness, or some emotional trauma in our lives, or loneliness, we can all be vulnerable. And great guilt can also cause vulnerability. If someone has in their past done something they very much regret they also need God's love and care.

One problem safeguarding learning also seeks to address is that, in the past, people have not known what to do if they suspected that someone was being abused (physically, mentally or spiritually). There has been an element of fear – what if I'm being stupid, or if I'm accused of 'whistleblowing', being a nuisance. The Church is very aware of this. Now there should be a safeguarding officer in every church, ours is Sarah Pepys. Sarah makes sure that information is readily available (it's on our notice boards, and some cards are available with this on) about the process for passing on our fear. Every member of the congregation should feel able to talk to her, or to a member of the clergy, or to someone in the Diocese. There is the assurance that they will be

taken seriously, that their fears will be looked into carefully, in complete confidence, with care for them, for the possible victim, and for the possible abuser.

So you and I have an important part to play in making 'The Church', whichever church we attend, places where people can be sure to find God's care and love. This means not being afraid of the word 'Safeguarding', not getting upset if Jo asks us to do DBS checks, or we're asked to do special training. We need to learn from others' experiences, to try to understand better how other people perceive our actions, to make ourselves more observant and aware of those around us, more able to spot if something doesn't seem right for someone we know, and to know what to do about it.

I have a feeling that COVID has had one positive effect – to make us more aware of our neighbours. So much kindness and consideration were shown by so many people during those worst days – that Good Samaritan human instinct being made very evident. I pray that this will continue, and I pray that everyone who looks to live by Christ's values will be ready to open their hearts and minds to learn how to be more caring, more ready to go out their way to care for those who are in need, just as that Samaritan did. If we do this we can make real, in some small way, God's desire to gather all his people under his wings, to keep them safe under his feathers.

Amen