Sermon 15/11/26 Safeguarding Sunday

I was trying to explain how my friends' house was a place that was both welcoming and comfortable. Comfortable not because the chairs were soft and the cake homemade, although they were, but because this was a place where no one would ask a question that you could not or would not be able to answer. A place where you were treated simply as yourself whenever and whyever you had called.

Our readings this morning have been chosen especially for Safeguarding Sunday. We hear from St Paul that all embracing definition of love. Love not as something soppy and a bit pathetic at times but as a strong foundation for who and what we are. Love that is patient and not proud. Love that rejoices with the truth. It is potentially a tough love that can be honest in what it gives and receives, because it is real.

Then we heard of Jesus explaining that the greatest people were not the most powerful, but often the most humble. In the gospel they are represented by a child. I read this week that children 'disturb the organised adult world', they lack our preconceptions, and much of our self-consciousness. While they may try to get away with mischief, they rarely think they are above the rules. Not so all adults.

Matthew continues to tell us about a missing sheep. The owner could have taken a pragmatic approach and been content with the 99 that were safe. In a world where most of us are removed from farming it can be hard to appreciate how much even modern farmers love their livestock. Hard to understand the differing personalities of each animal even when part of a herd. I have seen the sadness in a farmer's eyes as he tells of his favourite bull getting TB and being put down. The sheep's owner loved his animal and is only content with seeking it out and bringing it back home, back to where it belongs. His love overrides the hardship of the search, and his joy when he is successful, and returns home with his sheep is overwhelming.

As I have been writing this sermon, I have found myself returning again and again to two people from Scripture: Samuel and Simon. Their stories are very different, but both have something important to teach us about safeguarding.

I think you will all be familiar with Samuel, given to God by his mother in thanks that she had finally had a child. Ultimately, he is remembered as the prophet who anointed two Kings – Saul and David – but the story we share with children is of the boy Samuel. The boy who heard someone calling in the night and assumed it was the priest, Eli. Now Eli could have continued to send Samuel back to bed in a flurry of sleep disturbed grumpiness. But Eli did what we all should do. He listened to Samuel. He considered. He referred the issue to the correct place, in this case God, for us it would be a safeguarding officer. A master class in safeguarding practise, but imagine how the story might have ended if Samuel had not been listened to?

It is Simon who has been giving me a really hard time, continually popping up in my thoughts. Hard because it can be so difficult to reconcile when an adult is vulnerable, with their own view of the situation. Just to be clear it is the Simon from Cyrene who is attracting my attention. Simon who was pulled from a crowd to perform a service for a vulnerable man. The gospels tell us that Simon was 'pressed into service' to help carry the cross. The atmosphere that day was hostile, and Simon could have responded by joining in with the violence against Christ. Just a kick or a shove to a weakened man. But Simon instead showed compassion by helping to carry the burden of the wooden cross. He rose to the occasion to serve with love.

Despite the long time lapse, despite the changes in the world since then there are recognisable parallels for us. The child who needs to share something that could be imagined but may not be. The call for us to help someone, unexpected, unprepared but finding ourselves in that situation, needing to put away our own feelings and prejudices and put the other person first.

All these things are demonstrations of the love that God shows to us, and we should share to one another. The love that rejoices in the truth, that wants to be real and not just a gloss over the surface. The adults ready to listen, even in the middle of the night, to a young boy who appears to be hearing things. The people willing to go out of their way to find a lost animal or help a tortured man. People who responded to situations as they have arisen even though they are out of their control.

We are invited. All of us whose paths cross with people who are vulnerable, and those who are not vulnerable, are invited to show our love, to put others before ourselves. This could be by demonstrating that true love may not be about taking the easy option – it can be a tough ask. It could be a long and difficult search when someone is missing. Taking the time to listen, to really listen to what is worrying someone. Or to perform a service when another is vulnerable.

None of those things are easy, but mostly they are harder than responding to a call to update our safeguarding training or find our documents for a DBS check. Not everyone will be asked to do those things. But we are all asked to make this parish a place that is welcoming. A place that is comfortable in the sense of feeling safe. A place where everyone can feel valued whenever and whyever they are here, and in return to value others. And like at my friends' house there is often cake.