

Sunday 30th January – Safeguarding

There's a story about the aftermath of a devastating fire in a farm and farmyard. When the fire – which had destroyed the house and buildings – had been extinguished, the farmer was wandering about surveying the damage. He looked at the charred remains of various objects on the ground and noticed what looked like the remains of a hen. He kicked at what was left and was stunned when 4 chicks emerged from under the burnt carcass of the mother hen and scuttled away. The mother hen had given her life to protect her chicks, shielding them from the fire with her body.

I guess that those of us who are parents might have some understanding of what motivated the hen to do as she did. We can maybe imagine how our deep love for our children could lead us to do something like that. We find it hard to think of our children suffering.

I wonder then what Mary felt like when she and Joseph brought Jesus into the temple. She was a new mother, with her tiny child. Simeon in the temple said some amazing words about her child, words that must have made Mary wonder and reflect on what the angel had told her when announcing that she would have the child. But after those words of hope and encouragement spoken by Simeon he uttered these words “a sword will pierce your own soul too”. This must have set Mary wondering – perhaps in a kind of panic. What was going to happen to her child? This helpless child who seems so vulnerable. How could she protect him and keep him safe?

The story of the mother hen and her chicks might also remind us of what Jesus said when he stood and prayed and wept over the city of Jerusalem many years after he was brought to the temple by Mary and Joseph. *How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings.*

Safeguarding, as we have heard, is about this commitment, this desire to care for and protect the most vulnerable.

It's a desire we can see in Mary; it's a feeling many of us know from our own parental experience and it's a commitment of Jesus that he demonstrated so clearly in those words as he prayed over the city and in his actions and words throughout his life.

It's those kinds of thoughts – that overarching commitment to the most vulnerable – that we need to have in mind as we think this morning about safeguarding.

Safeguarding is basically about caring for people; looking out for them; making sure they are flourishing and thriving. For us in the church It's about what we do in and through the church, but it's also about how we look on the world and how we respond to what we hear and see.

The courses that are offered, encouraged and often mandated help us do this. Jan was sharing her experiences earlier. They help us notice things. And they make us aware that if we notice something that doesn't look right we should do something about it. They do this by giving us examples of situations that are sadly all too common in the world around us.

A child whose behaviour suddenly changes – becoming withdrawn or looking rather uncared for. An elderly person who is being taken advantage of (perhaps financially) by someone who should be looking out for them. The courses show us the signs of what to look for and show us what to do – who to tell – if we have any concerns. And we know from the tragic story of Arthur Labinjo Hughes that such things can and do happen in places like Shirley.

But we also have to make sure that the activities that take place in and through the church offer a safe and caring environment. Sadly this has not always been the case in the wider church and I am sure we have all heard about or read about some of the awful things that have happened in churches in the past. Be it the actions of individuals or the neglect of the church in covering things up. It may be – of course – that there is someone here who has experienced this for yourself. If that is the case, and if what you hear this morning is really painful, please don't lock it all away. There are people you can talk to; people who can help you work through what has happened and help you to move on. Do have a word in confidence with me or Sue if that is the case.

The Church of England is fully committed to do all it can – as an organisation and in and through all its churches – to make sure such things don't happen again. To ensure that we offer those who come to us a safe environment. And we are – rightly so – part of that response here in Shirley.

One aspect is that we have to do all we can to ensure that the people we place in positions of responsibility are suitable. It's a sad fact that some people will misuse their positions of trust. They might even deliberately work their way into a position of trust so that they can commit abuse.

Part of our response is about putting together good procedures so that we know – and have evidence – that the people we put our trust in are right to be trusted. We will use references and things like DBS checks to ensure this. And I am sure you understand this has to be done for all – even someone we may have known for years. If we are asking you to do a check it is not because we suspect you – it is to ensure good and sound procedures are followed. All our leaders have to undergo such checks – including all clergy, Readers, PCC members and group leaders.

A lot of Judith and Sue's time and energy is spent on making sure such correct and safe procedures are followed and courses undertaken – I am sure you can understand why it's so important. And I want to thank Judith and Sue for the huge amount of work they have put in and will continue to do so.

But those checks, those courses are not the whole picture. Safeguarding embraces much much, more than them.

In safeguarding there is often a focus of thoughts on children – perhaps because they are in many senses the most vulnerable, but also because Jesus had a special place for children – they are very much at the heart of the gospel.

At just about every baptism service I take I read the familiar words of Jesus *let the children come to me – do not stop them, for it is to such as these that the kingdom of heaven belongs*. Jesus had a special place for children, and we need to remember too Jesus' warning to those who might bring harm to children - *If any of you put a stumbling-block before one of these little ones it would be better for you if a great millstone were fastened around your neck and you were drowned in the depth of the sea*

Strong words indeed, but safeguarding goes beyond children. It includes all those who are vulnerable in any way. Older people, those living alone, those who need help and assistance to face up to the challenges of life. All are entitled to be treated properly and well.

Jesus said *“Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest”* and also *“I came that you might have life, and have it in its fullness”*.

Safeguarding is about a mindset that says we care and value everyone, and we will do all we can to ensure all people we come into contact with thrive and enjoy the fullness of life that Jesus offers.

Looked at things this way we see that safeguarding really is at the very heart of the gospel. It's about us doing all we can to ensure that everyone has the opportunity to live lives free from the oppression of abuse, to flourish, and to experience the fullness of life that Jesus offers to all.