

VIGILANCE

Sermon at the Eucharist on the Third Sunday before Advent (Safeguarding Sunday)

Readings: Job 19.23-27a; Psalm 17.1-8; 2 Thessalonians 2.1-5, 13-17; Luke 20.27-38

THE first Christians had a lively sense that the work of Christ was not finished. Christ had lived his earthly life, he had died, he had been raised from death, he had ascended to his Father in heaven: but he would also return in glory. This was the obvious inference to draw from one very stark and simple fact, true then as it is true today: that the world is a mess. Christ could not yet have completed his work of salvation, because the world was so very unsaved. The world, indeed, we might say, was so very *unsafe*. They looked at the world around them and saw war and violence, poverty and disease and famine, the breakdown of civil and social order, the suffering of the innocent, the exploitation of the vulnerable. *We* look at the world around us, and we see the same. It was entirely credible to the first Christians that the world might end in an appalling conflagration: they had visions of it. The only difference between their time and ours is that we can see even more clearly how that conflagration might happen: the slow death of the world through climatic catastrophe or the quicker death by nuclear disaster. Of course, it is not that either of those events *must* happen, but we can see how one or other of them *could*. It is remarkable how similar *our* visions of the end of the world are to those of the first Christians.

It was against that bleak background that the first Christians held to one overriding conviction, and asked themselves one overriding question. Their overriding conviction was that Christ, whom they believed to have risen from the dead and ascended into heaven, had not finished with the world. Somehow, someday, in the midst of the horror of the world he would appear, with power, with glory, and the world would be his once and for all. That was their overriding conviction. *Somehow*, but they didn't know how. *Someday*, but they didn't know when. Both Christ and the Apostle Paul warned their followers against trying to calculate the timescale of the world's end. They must simply hold to that overriding conviction that Christ had not finished with the world.

And the overriding question they asked themselves was this: if we are indeed in the in-between-times, the time between Christ's first coming and his coming again in glory, how shall we live? And the answer was clear: Christians must live as though

Christ were already among them. They must live like servants awaiting the return of their master at any moment. They must live in a state of readiness and preparation, of vigilance and expectation. In contrast to a world falling apart, a society disintegrating, law and order breaking down, they must live simple, good, and holy lives: lives worthy of their Lord and Master Jesus Christ. So (turning from their time to ours) Christians, and Christian communities, are called to be people and places of goodness, of kindness, of truthfulness, of integrity and transparency. Christian communities are to be places of refuge, places of safety.

IF that were the end of the sermon, we should all have a clear picture of our calling, as Christian individuals and Christian communities: our calling to be those beacons of goodness and truthfulness and safety in an unsafe world. A hard calling, a noble calling, even though a rather obvious conclusion to a sermon.

But we know that things are not like that. Christians do not always lead good and truthful lives. And on this Sunday when we are specially invited to think about safeguarding, we must acknowledge that churches are not always safe places.

Disagreeable and distressing as the subject is (just as all sin is disagreeable and distressing) we need to spend a few moments examining the problem. No doubt there is nothing new about the abuse of the young, or the elderly, or the defenceless. What perhaps is new in our time are the somewhat greater opportunities for reporting it, and indeed for recalling it many years after the event. And of course that is fraught with difficulty both for those who have cause to make allegations, and those against whom allegations are made. How is the truth to be established when so much happened in the past and behind closed doors? So let us admit the difficulty of discovering the truth, but let us not use that as an excuse for ignoring those with harrowing stories to tell.

The abuse of the young, the elderly, and the defenceless is not confined to the churches, of course not. Nor is it confined to our own country. But let us not use that as an excuse dismissing it simply as a universal phenomenon, as if that made it better and not worse. And if we are tempted to say that abuse is not confined to the churches but is found in all sections of society, have we not just been reflecting on the call of Christians to be exemplary beacons of goodness and truth, and our churches to be exceptional places of safety?

So let us think a bit further about the fact of abuse – and especially of sexual abuse – in the churches. Let's start at the easy end. Churches offer opportunities for people who are disposed to abuse other people because we try to be welcoming to all, we're usually glad to welcome anyone who offers to help, and often we're a bit naïve about other people's motives. From this point of view, larger churches and cathedrals in particular offer more opportunities to the would-be abuser because they are so busy, so open, so much is going on, and the abuser can often find a niche in the organization that serves his or her (usually his) purposes. So there is an urgent obligation on those who lead large churches – including Cathedral chapters and staff – to be especially vigilant. Over the past decade all cathedrals have been learning to be more vigilant and better organized, and I'm glad to say that those in a position to judge find that Worcester Cathedral has a generally robust safeguarding policy and practice.

I said I would start at the easy end, with a picture of would-be abusers seeking out churches as likely places in which to carry out their abusive activities. Outsiders ingratiate themselves into an unwary Christian congregation. But that's only part of the picture. The much more difficult part of the picture is of people who are *insiders* in the life of the church – church officials, church staff, church leaders, priests, bishops – who use their positions of responsibility and authority to abuse those in their care. A tiny majority of offenders, certainly; but still difficult to acknowledge, difficult to address, and very shameful.

In the course of my ministry I have met and known one or two of these men. I encountered one of the most notorious of them – a bishop - when I was an impressionable teenager. Had circumstances been different I might well have been one of his victims. He was an impressive spiritual leader, an inspiring preacher, a man with a winsome personality. Young men came under his spell, and pillars of church and state could think no wrong of him. If there is one lesson to draw from a shameful story such as that, it is that safeguarding can never be left solely to those in charge of an organization. *Everyone* is called to be vigilant.

WE began by noticing that all Christians are called to live lives of goodness and truthfulness, of vigilance and expectation. Lives of vigilance and expectation of the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. Lives of vigilance in a dark and divided world. Lives of vigilance even in a Church where evil can sometimes go unnoticed.

Is vigilance the same as suspicion? Do we go about imagining the worst of each other? No, certainly not. We are called to live together in love. But love does not have to be blind. Love does not have to be complacent. Love does not have to be lazy or timid or afraid to challenge. Jesus called it the wisdom of the serpent combined with the innocence of the dove. It was said of Jesus that he knew what was in the hearts of men. It is to that kind of loving vigilance that each one of us is called.

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