

How can we celebrate the Feast of Christ the King and at the same time observe Safeguarding Sunday? Actually it's not as difficult as it might appear. The key lies in the kind of king we see in the Jesus, and whom we seek both to worship and imitate. Here's no arrogant potentate keeping his subjects in fear and awe, even if some misleading images we may be given of him might sometimes suggest otherwise. If we still speak of Almighty God and picture Christ as a righteous judge, we should also recall those words in a collect we used a couple of months ago. They reminded us that our God is one who "declare(s) (his) almighty power most chiefly in in showing mercy and pity." (Trinity 11) Nowhere is this clearer than when God in Jesus suffered and died for us. We recall that it was when the risen Jesus told Thomas to reach out and touch his wounds that the disciple was inspired to call him "My Lord and my God!" (Jn 20.27-28). For here is the king who reigns from the cross, and these are "the wounds of love ". There can be no shadow of doubt that Christ the King was, and always is, on the side of the sufferer of abuse. He knows what it's like to be in their shoes, and we believe he still stands with them today. It is precisely because of this that we recognise him as our King, not distant and shielded from the pain of the world, but suffering with us now and longing to bring healing to damaged lives.

With this in mind let's think now about Safeguarding today, and especially in the church. On the most recent safeguarding course I took we were asked first to consider the question, "What do you think of when you hear the word 'safeguarding'?" I'll not burden you with everything I wrote, but I began with this, "The first part of the word "safeguarding", "safe", indicates being secure, not at risk from any kind of danger or threat. The second part, "guarding", points to ensuring that safety must be secured and maintained." And this is where we both as individuals and as a body all have our part to play. It's also against this background that public revelations of abuse in the churches, made over recent decades, have come as such an appalling shock. The church, described by St Paul as Christ's body, (1 Cor 12.12ff) ought of all places on earth to be the safest imaginable. Its members, but especially those who minister in any way, should be the most reliable of all people to whom the young and the vulnerable can turn in total trust and absolute confidence. But, as we all know, the truth has far too often been shown to be horrifically different. People who have identified themselves publicly as Christ's followers have secretly exploited their position of trust to prey on those who come to them for comfort and support. Indeed some pastors have actually sought their positions in order to go looking for potential victims.

What's to be done to combat this wholly outrageous state of affairs? Systems have been devised to attempt to identify potential abusers and put an end to their activities. But these can only go so far. Checking a person's possible criminal records is a positive step, but it can only catch those who are known to have offended before. And it'll rarely identify the potential abuser within a family. So equally important is to raise awareness among whole congregations, to help us all to recognise possible signs of a person's distress and enlist help. This is why programmes of training and updating now play such an important part. But they're not for everyone, and so it's also important to raise the awareness of us all to the responsibility we have for the good of all. Reminding ourselves of this by observing a safeguarding day such as today forms a part of this.

But it's not straightforward. It goes against the grain to encourage people to be suspicious of each other, when what we want above all is to be welcoming and trusting. This is why it's so vital to offer help in recognising tell-tale signs that something may be wrong and require further investigation, and how to go about it. We don't want to be judgemental, but we do want to be positively caring. The record of countless lives ruined, or in some cases even ended, because no-one noticed anything was wrong and passed on their suspicions is simply unacceptable.

Here at All Saints we have a strong and detailed Safeguarding Policy and have appointed officers to help us in using it for the safeguarding of the vulnerable. All this occupies a prominent place on our parish website. If you're able to look at it, please do. The statement of general principles is supported by links to the fuller documents and also includes a section for submitting an email to report any matters causing concern.

I've mentioned that safeguarding, and the dire results of failing to safeguard, have acquired an increasingly high profile over recent years. The truth is that they've been a scandal concealed right back through history. On Friday at our online Morning Prayer we remembered the thirteenth century St Elizabeth of Hungary, who fell into the hands of a domineering and sadistic confessor. She suffered mental and physical abuse from him which she humbly bore, devoting herself to caring for the poor until her weakened body gave way under the pressure and she died at the age of twenty-four. Even her royal status was not enough to protect her from the actions of an evil abuser parading as a champion of the Christian faith.

Our first reading began reassuringly with the words, "Blessed are those who trust in the Lord.....They shall be like a tree planted by water.....In the year of drought it is not anxious, and it does not cease to bear fruit."(Jer 17.7- 8) This is saying, "Trust me, all is well." Would that it were so! We know that is an unrealistically optimistic view of life. And so does the prophet, so he doesn't leave it there. The picture is instantly and brutally wrecked by the statement, "The heart is devious above all else; it is perverse."(9) We may feel this is unduly negative, but it serves as a timely corrective to the assertion that everything is in God's hands and so there's nothing for us to worry about. God is the true Safeguarder, but looks to us to join in this great enterprise.

When God walked among us in the person of Jesus he was constantly confronting evil and we, as his followers, are called to do the same. The voice of Jesus, the King, surprises his hearers by telling them that if they are to have a share his kingdom, it's not rank or power which will let them in. Childlike humility and faith are the entry qualifications. He follows this with his harshest condemnation of those who stand in the way of his beloved little ones. They deserve nothing better than a watery grave, held down by a weighty millstone. One would have hoped that this dire warning would have been enough to put off any potential abusers who were at the same time parading as Christians. But sadly not so.

The whole church, even including its members who are personally blameless, can't simply deny the shame of the evil perpetrated under the cover of its reputation and power. We're all sinners in our own individual ways and in need of repentance and forgiveness. And the fact that so much harm by others has been allowed to occur is not something we can ignore, far less justify. This has in many cases been made worse when the church has been more concerned to protect its good name than to act against the perpetrators and to offer support and comfort to their victims. And the damage done to any good name it might have had is incalculable.

Here we begin to understand how the human heart can be described as "devious above all else and "perverse". We're faced with nothing less than the eternal battle between good and evil. Yet we can share in the victory of good, if we submit ourselves wholeheartedly to our loving Saviour. Though he was and is our King, he emptied himself of power to become one of us, tempted and to all appearances defeated. Yet rising from death to offer us new life. But if we're to receive this amazing gift, it has to be by following his way, and risking suffering if need be. The compassion and healing Jesus displayed are now to be conveyed through us, his people. Christlike safeguarding is so much more than striving to keep evil at bay. It has to be the compassion of Christ positively and actively flowing out through us. I hardly need add that this will never happen without the constant and fervent prayer of all his people.

We're all familiar with the famous words of Saint Teresa of Avila that "Christ has no body now but yours. No hands, no feet on earth but yours." But did you know that she went on: "Yours are the eyes through which he looks with compassion on this world"? And I'm going to presume to add, "Yours are the ears through which he listens those who cry out to him in their pain"? Christ the King, whom we serve, reaches out now to his suffering children everywhere through the attentive, loving use of our eyes and ears. We must not fail him or them.

Loving Lord Jesus, our King and our Saviour, we come to you in grief and repentance. May we henceforth be your eyes and ears to discover the suffering of all our sisters and brothers in distress, and have the courage to confront evil wherever we find it. Amen

Colin James

