

Safeguarding Sunday

Each time I hear the gospel reading we've just had I can't help having a little whistle in my head and the words of Bobby McFerrin's 'Don't worry, be happy.' I'm not particularly a worrier – maybe you are, but if only it were that simple.

In the Genesis reading- the story of creation, we see a perfect and beautiful world being created. God saw everything he had made, and indeed, it was very good and Jesus, in the gospel points us to lilies and birds. In these places of perfect creation there are no worries. When I was in the Cotswolds recently, I went out for a walk across the fields and through the woods to an Arboretum. In hindsight, going for a walk through trees to see trees was a bit stupid. But I felt free. I felt full of joy being in creation and away from all responsibilities and tasks and timetables.

The church should be like this, a place where we should be able to bring our worries and share them with one another and offer them to God and experience freedom from sin and be safe and open. As it says in 1 Peter: Cast all your anxiety on him, because he cares for you.

Together, in our worship and our relationships with one another we should experience the new creation a foretaste of heaven. If we create a culture like the one described in the video, wonderful things will grow.

God blesses the 7th day, the sabbath, Sunday, today, and hallows it.

In order for this to happen, we need to care for those worrying the most, or those who are particularly vulnerable.

Woven throughout Christian Scripture the Holy Trinity commends to God's people a trinity of God's special concern: widows, orphans and strangers. Culturally, our groups of concern have changed a bit. Perhaps children, vulnerable adults and those who have suffered loss or trauma, or have health or financial concerns. Although, as a widow myself, if you want to offer me some special concern, I won't turn you down!

In the bible, there are more direct and indirect references to helping these vulnerable groups than there are to tithing, communion and baptism. In fact, there are over 2,000 references to matters of justice and injustice in the Bible; of which the principles of safeguarding are included.

Care for those in distress is included in the Mosaic law in the book of Exodus in the Old Testament (Exodus 22:21-22), and in the New Testament becomes the definition of authentic religion as described in James chapter 1 (1.27).

Genuine fasting involves sharing food with the hungry and in Isaiah, acceptable worship has to include providing shelter for the wanderer (Isaiah 58). Even more starkly, in Matthew's gospel, Jesus' parable of the sheep and goats, hospitality towards the vulnerable is the signifier of being saved (Matthew 25:31-46). Even this very brief theological survey shows safeguarding to be at the very heart of Scripture.

Caring for groups of special concern, those in distress, giving food to the hungry, providing shelter and giving hospitality to the vulnerable. Where we are already doing these things, which I think we are. We should give thanks to God and for one another and the resources we have.

Much of the material we have been using today come from Thirtyone:eight a Christian organisation resourcing good safeguarding practice which has tied itself to the biblical command of Proverbs 31:8 to advocate and care for those who are or may be vulnerable. It says:

“Speak out on behalf of the voiceless, and for the rights of all who are vulnerable.” Proverbs 31:8 (CEB)

If we are to be a safe place, we too need to speak out for the voiceless and vulnerable groups. To have a culture where we are clear that there is no place in this church for abuses of any kind or for discrimination because of gender, race, sexual orientation, age, disability, background, or anything else. We are all equal in God's sight, and therefore in the eyes of each other. We must raise concerns if we see or suspect these things are happening. The responsibility belongs to all of us.

Of course, on a lower level, we all make mistakes with our behaviour. We're all human and we also need to recognise that we all have unconscious bias- social stereotypes about certain groups of people that we form from outside our own conscious awareness. Everyone holds unconscious beliefs about various social and identity groups.

The thing about having an open culture, is that we can challenge one another on these things and ensure we are seeing every human being as God does. If someone makes a sexist comment or says something which is simply unkind,

we should be able to talk to them about it. If we ourselves unconsciously or consciously discriminate or speak in a way which is hurtful, we should be open to a conversation about how that falls short of our call to love our neighbour as ourselves. We are helping each other on our Christian pilgrimage, always being humble and mindful that we have a plank in our own eye. As it says in 1 Corinthians 'Let all that you do be done in love.' (1 Cor 16:14) Biblically, we see that is was ever thus in the church. Jesus said:

¹⁵ "If your brother or sister sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone. If you are listened to, you have regained that one."

Jesus could see that people messed up and suggests in the following verses we may need to get help from others or the church leadership, but note the first course of action was not to gossip or moan to everyone about it, which in my experience is what happens in most churches and organisations! A caveat here, is of course, that if we are talking about safeguarding and abuse, or if you are someone else is at risk of serious harm- if you have a concern along those lines, you should speak to Keith, our safeguarding coordinator, or me. This is a different scenario and needs to be addressed appropriately and swiftly.

So, let's recap. We have established that no one should have to worry about coming to church but rather know it is a place where they can bring and share their worries. It should be an open and honest place where our culture means we can all grow and flourish and see a new creation, to experience in our worship the Spiritual equivalent of Lilys and birds.

We should have a particular heart for the voiceless and the vulnerable- to speak up for them, and be humble about our own behaviour with a willingness to challenge and be challenged and we all have a responsibility to appropriately report anything of concern.

And today we ask those questions again:

What's our normal? What do we believe? How do we express ourselves? How do we behave towards each other?

God blesses this 7th day and hallows it, and let's pray he sees all our other times together as a church and says 'indeed, it is very good.'

**Dear God, help us to be a church that:
loves, welcomes, protects.
Listens, learns, serves.
Repents, restores, transforms.
Values, cares, believes.
God of Justice and compassion, hear our prayer.
Help us, heal us, guide us, we pray.
In Jesus name. Amen.**