

**Brancepeth sermon**  
**16 November 2024**

Daniel 12.1-3

Mark 13.1-8

Psalm 16

*Open our ears, O Lord,  
to hear your word and know your voice.  
Speak to our hearts and strengthen our wills,  
that we may serve you today and always. Amen*

Many of you will be aware that, little over a week ago,  
a report was published into the terrible abuse  
carried out by a man called John Smyth,  
and about various leaders in the Church of England  
who were told about his abuse  
but did not act vigorously to stop him.

And you will know that one of those who has admitted  
that he did not do enough is the Archbishop of Canterbury,  
and that, a few days ago, he offered his resignation.

It is in the light of those events that we have received  
the following letter from the acting Bishop of Durham,  
Bishop Sarah.

Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ (she writes)

**‘The light shines in the darkness and the darkness has not  
overcome it’. (John 1: 5)**

I wanted to take this opportunity to write to you  
at this time of turmoil and soul-searching within our church  
following the publication of the Makin Review  
and the subsequent resignation  
of the Archbishop of Canterbury.

I do hope that many of you will have seen this statement  
that Dean Philip and I made  
and which was posted on the diocesan website:

*“As the Acting Bishop of Durham and Dean of Durham  
our thoughts and prayers are with all who have been impacted  
by the abuse disclosed in the Makin Review.*

*We lament the ways the church has not responded well*

*both in the historic and more recent past.*

*Safeguarding is the responsibility of us all,  
especially those of us in leadership positions.*

*We understand and respect the Archbishop of Canterbury's  
decision to resign and our prayers are with him and his family  
at this difficult time.*

*In Durham Diocese we work to continually grow  
our safeguarding culture and accountability in all areas of  
church life  
as we seek to witness, however imperfectly, to Jesus Christ."*

(Her letter continues:)

Personally, I was deeply shocked  
by the suffering of victims and survivors  
documented in the Makin review  
and the safeguarding process failures that  
allowed the abuse to continue for so long.

I am struck afresh by the difference we make  
to the lives of others by living out faithfully  
our safeguarding training,

placing the needs and wellbeing of  
children and vulnerable adults  
at the heart of our church communities  
and authentic faith in Jesus Christ.

I continue to be thankful for all  
our Parish Safeguarding Officers,  
our clergy and PCCs who invest so much of themselves  
in striving daily in our parishes  
to keep those who are vulnerable, young and old alike,  
as safe as possible.

This Sunday, November 17,  
is designated as Safeguarding Sunday,  
giving an opportunity for all our church communities  
to reflect afresh together on  
this most searching of responsibilities.

Please be assured that I and the Bishop's Leadership Team,  
together with Beth Miller,  
our Diocesan Safeguarding Adviser,

will be reflecting on, and learning from,  
both the **Makin Review** and the **Scolding Review on Soul Survivor**.

The Diocese is also currently preparing for  
our **Independent Safeguarding Audit**  
which will take place in **May** next year  
and will help us continue to grow  
in our practice and effectiveness  
using the **National Safeguarding Standards**  
which you can find on the diocesan website.

Finally, please do pray with me  
for the searching light of Christ  
to shine into the darkness of this time  
and reveal what needs to be seen and dealt with,  
whatever and wherever that may be.

Peace be with you

Sarah

All of this news might seem, to most of us,  
a long way from Brancepeth,  
a long way from our own little church here.  
But what we have learnt from the Makin Review,  
as we have also learnt from many previous reports,  
is that all too often, what it takes to make a church unsafe  
is not grand conspiracies amongst those in power,  
it's not organised cover-ups and plots –  
it is ordinary people, looking away from things  
they find uncomfortable;  
ordinary church members like us not wanting to make a fuss,  
or to rock the boat,  
and so persuading ourselves that we don't need  
to say anything about something we have seen  
that doesn't seem quite right. —————

Now, our readings today were quite dark.  
From both the book of Daniel and the Gospel of Mark,  
they were from those passages that  
paint quite lurid pictures of the future.

Daniel's prophecy speaks of 'A time of anguish,  
such as has never occurred since nations first came into existence';  
Jesus speaks of nation rising against nation,  
and kingdom against kingdom;  
of earthquakes and famines.

They are examples of a strand in scripture  
that tells us that we can't expect the world  
to be an arena in which peace and love steadily grow,  
and that we should not be surprised if the world is  
dangerous and frightening.

And, however much this message is couched in  
fantastical imagery and dramatic overstatement,  
it's actually a strand of scripture that is profoundly realistic.

'Yes,' it says, 'your eyes are not mistaken.

When you look at the world and see how broken it is,  
how unstable, how violent, you're not being pessimistic,  
you're not being overly negative –  
that *is* how the world is, much of the time.'

And Jesus' words also teach us to be realistic  
about the *church* as well.

Yes, we want the church to be a place of greater safety,  
a community of love, in the mist of all this danger.

But people can speak and act in Jesus' name,  
speak and act as Christians, as members of his church,  
and yet can still, he says, lead people astray –  
can still do people harm.

*Beware*, he says –

Beware of everything within and around the church  
that reflects, and that contributes to, the brokenness of the world.

It is as if he is saying: I know you want to think of the church as  
a haven from all that, but you need to be realistic:  
the problems are *in here* as well as *out there*.

The church is not automatically a safe place.

Even when people are speaking and acting in Jesus' name,  
sometimes *especially* when they are speaking and acting in his  
name,



they can be leading us astray.

What might it mean for us here to listen to Jesus words,  
and his instruction to ‘Beware!’?

Well, part of it is, I think, simply that we do need to be realistic.

Bad things *will* happen. Abuse *will* happen.

It will sometimes happen to people we know.

It will sometimes happen in places we love.

It will sometimes happen in ways we don’t expect,  
and would never have thought possible.

We should be realistic about that.

But what does it mean to be a church that is  
aware of that possibility,

that hasn’t closed its eyes and ears to that possibility?

What does it mean to be a *realistic* church,  
and so a church that is in the proper sense *wary*?

It certainly doesn’t mean being  
constantly suspicious of one another.

It is of course right, most of the time, to trust each other,  
to be generous in our thinking about one another,  
  
not constantly to be putting  
  
the worst construction we can think of  
  
on each other's words and actions.

We *do* want to be a community of trust and generosity  
where we think charitably of each other.

It also certainly doesn't mean that  
  
we each become investigators –  
  
a community of Miss Marples or Peter Wimseys,  
  
digging through each other's rubbish bins  
  
in search of incriminating evidence.

That's not what we're meant to be towards one another.

It does, however, mean that we need to be  
  
an *open-eyed* community and an *open-eared* community.

So, first, we need to be an *open-eyed* community.

This is a bit like that line you will hear on trains these days.

'If you see something that doesn't look right,

Speak to staff or text British Transport Police 61016.

We'll sort it. See it, say it, sorted.'

That doesn't mean:

look at your fellow passengers with suspicion.

It doesn't mean:

start rifling through any bag you think has been abandoned.

Instead it means:

if you *do* happen see something that concerns you,

*tell* someone about it.

So, in a church context – even though you *do* want

to believe the best of the people around you,

even though you *do* want to be charitable

in your interpretation of people's words and actions,

*if* you see or hear something that doesn't look right,

Speak to your Parish Safeguarding Officer – Geoff Moore –

or to one of the other safeguarding contacts

that you can find on a poster at the back and on our website.

It may well be nothing – but it is best to be safe.

So: be an *open-eyed* community.

But we also need to be an *open-eared* community.

And that simply means being a community in which we all,  
as much as we can, genuinely listen to one another.

Think what it would be like for one of us,  
if we had horrible experiences in the past,  
or were experiencing something horrible in the present,  
and really wanted to share that with someone.

What kind of community would we need to be,  
what kind of people would we need to be,  
for someone in that position to feel properly *safe*  
- to *be* properly safe -  
in speaking to us about it?

If *I* wanted to speak up in that kind of way, for instance,  
I think I would want to know I was in a community where,  
just in the ordinary run of community life,  
I was habitually listened to -  
where I was given space to speak,  
where people didn't interrupt me all the time,  
where people genuinely listened to what I was saying

and heard how *I* felt  
rather than *telling* me how I must feel,  
a community where people didn't constantly shy away  
from difficult topics, or treat them with embarrassment,  
where I knew people would be attentive,  
but not probe further than I wanted them to,  
where I knew I could trust people not to gossip,  
and where I also knew that people were reliable –  
so that when they say they are going to do something  
in response to anything I have said,  
I know I can trust them to do it.  
  
I would want to know that this was a community in which  
I could say difficult things, and be taken seriously,  
and be reacted to kindly.  
  
If we can be a community like that in the little things,  
in the ordinary run of our life –  
if we can routinely be that kind of *open-eared* community –  
then perhaps we can be a community in which  
it is harder for abuse to hide, or people's pain to go unnoticed.

One last point. If I did have something  
very difficult, some experience of abuse to share,  
I think I would also want to know,  
if I was going to speak out about it to others in this church,  
that I was in a community that  
took all this safeguarding stuff seriously,  
even when it involved a lot of rather burdensome  
processes and procedures,  
because it was a community that recognised  
the very deep seriousness of the problem,  
and that was committed together to tackling it.

So, yes, this has been a week of headline news,  
horrific stories, and dramatic developments –  
all of it happening, it seems, a world away from us,  
from our village, from our congregation.

But it is also a week for us *here*  
to heed Jesus' injunction to 'beware!'  
and to ask what we can do to make sure that

*our* community does not provide the soil  
in which *another* horrific story could begin to grow.  
It is a week for asking what *we* can do to be a safe church,  
an open-*eyed* church, an open-*eared* church.

As the Church of England's safeguarding policy says,  
'the care and protection of children,  
young people and vulnerable adults  
involved in Church activities  
is the responsibility of the whole Church.

*Everyone* who participates in the life of the Church  
has a role to play in promoting a Safer Church for all.'

*Lord, help us all to take those words to heart. Amen.*