



Sunday 17th November 2024

“Safeguarding Sunday”

Today, is designated Safeguarding Sunday.

Given the events of the past week, which have witnessed the resignation of Justin Welby, the current Archbishop of Canterbury, the irony of this day can't be lost on anyone.

John Smyth, a well-connected and highly regarded Evangelical Anglican and Queen's Counsel, has been revealed as the most prolific serial abuser ever to be associated with the Church of England.

Keith Makin's report into the abuse perpetrated by him over many years, also details the scandalous negligence of the Church of England's leadership over the past 25 years.

Smyth has been termed “the Church of England's Jimmy Saville”: “a moral crusader” who abused his position as a Licensed Lay Reader to subject dozens of boys and young men to violent and emotional trauma in the name of Jesus through his association with Winchester College, the Iwerne Trust (which organised summer camps for young Christians from Public Schools), in Zimbabwe and in South Africa.

Rightly, there are many people - not only in the Church of England, who feel shame and anger about what has happened, but those for whom we should feel most sorrow are the victims and survivors of Smyth, and of all other abusers.

Whilst the Archbishop of Canterbury, friend of Smyth and a voluntary “dormitory officer” at the Iwerne Trust camps, has acknowledged something of the blame, both personally and on behalf of the institution he leads, it fell to the Bishop of Newcastle (who called on the archbishop to resign) to ask the hard question: “can we really trust the Church of England to keep us safe? [and answered] “I think the answer at the moment is “no”.”

Smyth died six years ago, having abused at least 115 children and young men. The report was commissioned in 2019, and many have wondered if it would ever be published. Last week, the finished report was published in all its horrifying detail.

As Makin said: “Many of the victims have carried this abuse silently for more than 40 years” and, it concludes, Smyth was able to get away with abusing so many for so long, because of a cover-up by “powerful evangelical clergy”.

Just how many other bishops and senior Church leaders will step back or be forced to resign their positions in the coming weeks we shall have to wait to see.

However many column inches the resignation of senior Church figures will occupy in media feeds, we must not lose sight of those people who have suffered abuse, and those who have failed in their duty to ensure that people are safe, not only in parish churches and cathedrals, but at events organised by powerful and influential individuals.

Many people here in the UK, and across the whole of the Anglican Communion, will want to know what happens next in terms of holding to account those who are implicated by the Report's conclusions and, perhaps, more acutely, how safe are the parish churches, cathedrals and Church Schools that they and their children attend.

Nationally – and internationally, such things lie in the hands of the diocesan and national Safeguarding teams; locally, that is here at St Marylebone, I want to assure everyone, that we have a robust - and tested – Safeguarding Protocol, which is not only based upon diocesan and national guidelines, but goes way beyond it – and you can find a link to the Protocol and its policies on the front page of our website.

Our clergy team, Kirsty Walker our Safeguarding Officer, Liam O'Sullivan, our Safeguarding Champions, Parent Leaders and Parent Helpers know what they are to do should any Safeguarding concern be raised and all have received the appropriate DBS checks and relevant training.

One Sunday a year is designated as Safeguarding Sunday, drawing particular attention to the way that keeping children and adults at risk of harm must sit at the heart of our faith and lives and practise as Christians, but as the Makin Report points out in its first recommendation, safeguarding is everyone's responsibility all of the time.

The Church is an ecclesial community. It exists when women and men gather together to worship, to pray, to break bread, to study the scripture, to carry what they become in and through the Eucharist out into everyday life – whatever, wherever the setting.

Whosoever we are as Christians, *wheresoever* we are as Christians, *whatsoever* we engage in as Christians we must be aware of our own power - and be willing to be challenged about our language and our behaviour. Each of us stands constantly exposed in the light of the Resurrection in what we do, and in what we fail to do – in thought, word and deed. There is no hiding place.

The past is, of course, never simply “the past” – that is one of the lessons of Remembrance Sunday – indeed it is the core lesson of *every* Sunday as we gather around the altar to celebrate the once and one-for-all-time-and-for-all-eternity victorious Resurrection of Jesus and the triumph of life over death, hope over despair and love over hate.

In recent years, much has changed and improved with regards to keeping people safe, not only in the Church but in all organisations, but this last week has shown everyone, all too clearly and all too painfully, that there is still much work to be done.

More support has to be provided for victims and survivors; more support has to be given to parish safeguarding officers and those who support them; better policies and processes have to be put into place and vigorously enacted, and it is good that here at St Marylebone and in so many parishes, cathedrals, and dioceses there are people working tirelessly to make sure that the Church is indeed a safe place.

The Makin Report and the resignation of the 105th Primate of All England, the leader of the world's 75 million Anglicans, is a watershed moment not just for the Church of England and the Anglican Communion, but for the worldwide Church of God. There has to be a change of culture, so that everyone, no matter how old or young, whatever their colour or gender or political opinion, not only knows that they are safe but feels that they are safe with every fibre of their being.

Jesus saved his strongest condemnation for those who got in the way of the relationship between God and the human soul. "It would be better", he said, "if a millstone should be tied around their neck, and they be thrown into the sea".

Let us pray:

Loving God, we ask your forgiveness for the times when in your Church we have failed to protect vulnerable people. We pray for your healing for those who have been hurt and for those who live with guilt and regret. We ask for your wisdom and direction as we seek to keep safe all your children, in the name of Christ. Amen.

The Revd Canon Dr Stephen Evans, Rector of St Marylebone



St Marylebone
Parish Church