

**17<sup>th</sup> November, 2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday before advent.**

**Daniel 3 and Matthew 13: 24-30 and 36-43**

**Mother Emma**

This week, as many will be aware, the Archbishop of Canterbury has offered his resignation. He did so in response to a report which suggested that if he and others had acted with greater urgency in a particular safeguarding situation, innocent young people might well have been spared horrendous physical suffering and abuse or the emotional long-term pain of feeling that their story had gone unheard.

Today our hearts go out to every young or vulnerable person who has experienced abuse, we hold them in our prayers before God, and we beseech him to help the Church to work towards ensuring that such situations can be prevented in future.

Archbishop Justin recognised and apologized for his failing and those of the Church, but he also saw that in order for people to maintain or repair their trust in the Church of England after such an event, a clear new start must be made. But the Church is not simply one Archbishop, or the bishops or senior clergy at whom fingers are pointing, but the whole Church, Christ's Body in the world. Significant steps have already been taken in recent years across the Church of England, and in this, as every parish, to ensure that safeguarding processes are given the importance and centrality they deserve.

But every single person who professes Christ and seeks to live out his life of love and compassion, must be aware of our own responsibility in preventing or calling out abuse, especially of the powerless, by shining a light into darkness and wrongdoing, and in sustaining and defending those who have suffered. Our Bishop of London wrote in a message to clergy this week:

*We must lament the past and set about the vital task of creating a better future.*

This Sunday had long ago been designated as "Safeguarding Sunday" in the church's calendar, and it is a timely moment for us to commit ourselves once again to making St Mary Abbots (like every other church) a place of safety and warmth, where everyone who comes can feel welcomed and supported by the whole people of God in this place.

As we consider these events in the light of our readings today, we cannot fail to reflect on the appalling violence so often visible in the hearts of humanity. In the story uncovered by the Makin report, the systematic, violent abuse of young men and boys by a single individual, we find ourselves recoiling with horror and disgust. How could someone – well-known and respected in his profession – give in to such vicious and dark activities?

In similar vein, we consider King Nebuchadnezzar, a king of great wealth and power, who demands that every one of his subjects should bow down and worship the golden idol he had created, and condemns those who do not to a horrific death in a fiery furnace. What drove him to punish his people for failing to honour his whim in such a terrible way? And while we are thinking about it, who invented crucifixion, another horrific means of torture, and decided to condemn Jesus to that appalling death, just because of ill-founded rumours of blasphemy?

Perhaps the answer to all these questions lies in humanity's instinctive desire for power. We can only imagine that John Smyth felt an exhilarating sense of power as he attacked the young men in his care. Nebuchadnezzar knew that he had power to destroy anyone who would not obey his will, and Pontius Pilate and the Jewish leaders were afraid that Jesus' teaching would undermine their own somewhat insecure power.

Suddenly perhaps we realise that the potential seeds of violence and hatred lie deep within anyone who wields power or authority – or indeed anyone who fears that whatever vestige of power they have may be taken away – from the leader of a great nation to a controlling partner, parent or teacher. We have to be on our guard that we are not allowing the seeds of hostility or violence to grow within us or within our communities, nor walking by on the other side when we suspect others, especially the powerless, may be suffering.

In our second reading from St Matthew's Gospel, Jesus is very clear that good and evil exist side by side within the world, and his image of good seed and weeds planted together makes clear that it is not always possible to see the difference until we see the fruit they bring forth. Even then, rooting out the evil may also uproot the good, and Christ's conclusion is that at the final judgement, all will become clear, and people will receive their just deserts.

The victims of John Smyth are understandably devastated that he never faced justice here on earth because of the church's and the police's failure to act more promptly. But perhaps our reading might in some small way reassure them that even if he did not experience the human judgement he deserved, that there is a far greater judgement in heaven. Not everyone will be reassured by the prospect of God's judgement... Perhaps we wonder in that case how our own actions will be regarded at the end of time?

It is not fashionable today to speak openly about the Last Judgement, even at this time of year when, during the Kingdom season and the Advent season which follows, many of the readings point towards a moment when *"those who offend, and those which do iniquity are cast out ... but the righteous shall shine forth as the sun in the kingdom of their Father."*

However we conceive of Hell or of the Judgement at the end of the world, our readings – and the evidence of our own eyes – leave us in no doubt that there is both deep Christian compassion and undoubted evil and violence in this world, and that both are obvious to God.

As we seek to follow Christ, we are given the very clear message through his Word that our world is a world in which evil and the abuse of power are frighteningly visible, but in which there are also those who take seriously their responsibilities as God's people to defend the weak, to comfort the broken-hearted and to shine Christ's light into every place where darkness may hide.

On this Safeguarding Sunday, may we pledge to be amongst those who bear good fruit, joining together under God to offer comfort and safety and love.

Amen