

Collect, Readings and Reflection for 16 November 2025, Safeguarding Sunday

Collect (*the Church's prayer for today*):

Heavenly Father,
whose blessed Son was revealed
to destroy the works of the devil
and to make us the children of God and
heirs of eternal life:
grant that we, having this hope,
may purify ourselves even as he is pure;
that when he shall appear in power and
great glory
we may be made like him in his eternal
and glorious kingdom;
where he is alive and reigns with you,
in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
one God, now and for ever.
Amen.

Or

Heavenly Lord,
you long for the world's salvation:
stir us from apathy,
restrain us from excess
and revive in us new hope
that all creation will one day be healed
in Jesus Christ our Lord.
Amen.

Today's reflection is by the Vicar, the Revd Canon Jonathan Cain. It was preached during a service focussed on safeguarding.

Safeguarding

Readings: Psalm 91; John 8:1-11

I preached on this Sunday last year shortly after Justin Welby, the former Archbishop of Canterbury, resigned following the accusation that he had not acted with sufficient curiosity in an historic abuse case. Safeguarding usually hits the news when such historic cases come to light. Standing with those who have survived abuse includes demanding justice and, as the Andrew formerly known as Prince has discovered recently, these demands can reach into powerful places. But safeguarding is not just, or even mainly about demanding that abusers are brought to justice. Safeguarding is about protecting those who are vulnerable now, to prevent abuse, and the trauma that follows.

We know nothing about the woman at the centre of the gospel story this morning, other than she was caught in a sexual act with someone who was not her husband. Yes, there was a man involved in this story too – I wonder where he was. Perhaps this couple were childhood sweethearts whose love was forbidden by their families. Perhaps this was a one-off act of passion. Perhaps this was a loveless transaction. Depending on where our imaginings take us, and to use criminal language for a moment, we may see this woman as a perpetrator – adultery is not a victimless act – or as a victim – women are frequently sexually exploited. Whatever the circumstances,

the woman is vulnerable now. She faces the anger of the crowd and the prospect of death by stoning. When she is brought to Jesus, the stakes for her are high. The stakes are high for Jesus too. His credibility as a Rabbi and teacher is on the line. And the stakes are high for the crowd who, because of their understanding and interpretation of the Jewish Law, feel compelled to participate in an act of murder.

“Teacher, this woman was caught in the act of adultery. In the Law Moses commanded us to stone such women. Now what do you say?”

At this point, Jesus’ actions speak louder than any words. He pauses. He bends down. He draws in the sand with his finger. He stands, and in a few words, he invites those present to examine their consciences and their worthiness to meet out such summary justice. He bends down, pauses and draws in the sand again.

At the heart of this gospel story is one of the Ten Commandments from the Jewish Law. In common with many churches, we have these commandments carved in stone on the east wall of the north aisle at St James’. I wonder how we receive these words. Are they a reminder of the requirements of God’s will to which we submit? Are they a set of rules that we must obey? Perhaps we see them as a tick box against which we can measure our consciences and judge the behaviour of others.

This type of interpretation, that of a moral tick box, hinges on our understanding of obedience. But the Hebrew Bible, from which we Christians derive the Ten Commandments, contains no word for ‘to obey’. A Jewish understanding of obedience is more like ‘listening’ which allows us to view the commandments not as an external constraint but as an invitation to be attentive to God; not as the imposition of God’s arbitrary will but as forming us for God’s friendship and God’s freedom. Obedience is not then ticking the right box, it is about being summoned into a new space; a space to experience God’s freedom.

Going back to our gospel story, in that moment of hesitation Jesus demands obedience by inviting those in the crowd to listen to God. He summons those present into a new space freeing the woman from a violent death and freeing those in the crowd from having blood on their hands and, most likely, from massive hypocrisy.

Jesus’ final words to the woman are not words of condemnation or judgement. “Go now and leave your life of sin,” is an invitation for her to leave her past behind. Whatever the circumstances of this adulterous relationship, the deceit, the guilt, the fear of and act of discovery are destructive forces for her and for others involved. Jesus looks her in the eye to remind her that she is beloved of God, created for love and life. Jesus’ gaze is an invitation into a new space; a space to experience God’s freedom. I would suggest that for her to be summoned into such a space, to experience such freedom it was first necessary for her to feel safe.

Psalm 91, our first reading this morning, offers the language of safety or refuge. The psalmist speaks of dwelling in God’s shelter, of finding rest beneath God’s wings. This is not sentimental insulation from the world’s dangers, but the moral posture of a community listening to God and shaped by trust: a place where the weak are defended,

the frightened are heard, and the practices of life—speech, oversight, hospitality—are ordered toward protection. If God is refuge, then the church that bears God's name must practise refuge in concrete ways: in our policies, in our culture, and in our daily attentiveness. This is a practice that goes far beyond ticking boxes. Safeguarding goes far beyond ticking boxes.

Safeguarding is firstly the recognition that people can be harmed. We most often speak about children, but safeguarding concern includes adults at risk of harm by virtue of a vulnerability, which could be inherent – a disability, for example – or circumstantial, an imbalance of power due to position, wealth, physical strength.

Taking Safeguarding Sunday seriously is first to recognise that we were all children once and that we can all be harmed. We could all find ourselves in a position where we are at risk and where we do not feel safe.

And taking Safeguarding Sunday seriously is also to recognise that we all fall short and that we can all cause harm. Our words, actions and omissions, however intended, have the potential to make others feel uncomfortable and unsafe.

Safeguarding Sunday is an opportunity for us to put to one side high profile and newsworthy cases of sexual abuse and the hunt for who knew, who was there and who did what and when. Safeguarding Sunday is a time for being with each other and acknowledging our fragility – our own potential to harm and be harmed; and for listening to and upholding those who've been through profound trauma.

And I will pause they and say that if the theme of today has stirred up memories for you and emotions that are difficult and painful, please be in touch. I am here to listen. It is the centre of my calling as your priest.

If we accept the Church's vocation as a refuge, and my suggestion that God's freedom is only available to those who feel safe, then Safeguarding Sunday is also a time to acknowledge those who do not feel safe when they come into a community like this. Those who are wounded by the arrows of preachers who speak judgment without mercy. Those who are made to feel not good enough. Those for whom shame is a heavy weight. Safeguarding Sunday is a time for honest reflection and a time to recommit ourselves to hold the truth arising from our Bible texts this morning.

The church must be a refuge. Psalm 91 calls us to practice safety, accountability and hospitality so those who are vulnerable are not further harmed within our walls. The church must refuse to shield wrongdoing. John 8 warns institutions that cloak themselves in law or reputation or misguided 'obedience' while failing the weak and vulnerable. Safeguarding is not a technicality, a tick box exercise or an optional extra. It is gospel practice and imperative. Each of us must cultivate a culture of vigilance and compassion: notice when someone is withdrawn; speak up and act when something feels wrong; make our community one where the vulnerable can find shelter rather than exposure.

The psalmist teaches that God is shelter; Jesus shows how shelter looks in action — protection for the vulnerable, refusal to participate in violent condemnation, and an offer of a transformed life. Let us be a church shaped by that shelter: listening, acting, and refusing silence until every person can say, “Here I am safe.”

Amen.

S⊕ JAMES WOODSIDE
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