

Sunday 6th August – Safeguarding Sunday

Psalm 91

O God, make the door of this house
wide enough to receive all who need
your love and mercy;
open enough to accept all who seek
human love and fellowship;
and narrow enough to shut out all envy,
pride and strife.

Make its threshold smooth enough
that all may enter,
whatever their age, ability or story;
low enough to be no stumbling block to straying feet;
but rugged and strong enough to turn back
the tempter's power.

O God, make the door of this house
the gateway to your eternal kingdom.

Those are the words on the poster that is in the church porch welcoming people to this building. We might not notice it, but I would wager that many visitors see it and read it. Perhaps it's the reason why some feel they are able to come in. This is a place where they feel safe

And it sums up a lot of what there is to say about safeguarding.

wide arms of welcome, but sharp keen eyes to look out for danger
a place of safety for all in need; but a no-go area for those with ill intent
a place where God's love is freely available to everyone

It echoes some of the thoughts we heard as we read Psalm 91 which speaks about the refuge God offers to all. The place of welcome and safety God offers.

*Those who live in God's presence say to the Lord, 'My refuge and my stronghold,
my God, in whom I put my trust*

*You shall not be afraid of any terror by night,
nor of the arrow that flies by day;
There shall no evil happen to you,
neither shall any plague come near your tent.
For he shall give his angels charge over you,
to keep you in all your ways.*

When I last did safeguarding training (and yes all clergy and Readers have to take an advanced safeguarding course over 2 days every 3 years) we had to think about Psalm 91 before the course. To me it presents a picture of what church should be like – just as that poster in the porch paints a similar picture.

That is what Sue and Judith as coordinators are helping us achieve; that is what the courses – such as the one Linda just spoken about – are helping us all to put into practice. That is what we aspire to.

Safeguarding then is about making everything we do and all that we are safe and welcoming; making our church activities places people can feel comfortable and unthreatened. That of course is number one, and an area where, sadly, the national church has fallen down many times over the years to its shame.

But safeguarding goes further than that. Its also about keeping our eyes and ears open and noticing. Noticing what is going on; noticing people; reading the signs and looking out for the unspoken words. Looking out for any sign of abuse particularly in children, young people and adults who are vulnerable in some way – such as some elderly people or those with learning difficulties etc. Looking out for any sign that might mean someone is not in a place of safety.

Abuse can take a wide range of forms including sexual, physical, psychological, financial abuse. And when we notice something that might indicate abuse is taking place we need to tell someone. We don't try to solve the issue ourselves. Our safeguarding coordinator Sue Harries is usually the best place to start. Failing that myself or Richard or Wendy.

When I used to work in a school it wasn't always the obvious people – teachers for example – who noticed when children might be at risk of being abused. I remember a conversation with one of the dinner ladies who had noticed a particular girl's eating habits had changed suddenly and radically. A small thing that could have meant that things were happening at home or even in school. Bullying, neglect, or worse. But the dinner lady noticed – and she said something.

You may have seen the TV series “the sixth commandment” recently. It tells a true story of an abuser who held a senior lay position in the church, and who was being considered for ordination. It took a concerned family member noticing and suspecting and then telling someone to bring him to justice.

The courses like the one Linda has been on help us recognise those kinds of signs signs, and teach us the things we need to do in response.

Here is an example of a scenario which has come up in some such course. It relates to possible domestic abuse – a subject we perhaps don’t like thinking about, but which happens all the same.

Andrea married her partner Dave three years ago she's got a learning disability and shortly after their marriage Andrea was diagnosed with rheumatoid arthritis.

This disease progresses rapidly and Andrea now suffers from significant pain in her joints and has mobility problems.

Andrea used to work as a cleaner, but she became unable to cope with the demands of the work and left the job a year ago.

This is a conversation between Andrea and a pastoral visitor from church who calls on her:

Visitor	I try phoning you Monday and Tuesday, be you must have been out
Andrea	no I never have enough money to go out.
Visitor	But you're always on answer phone
Andrea	Yeah but Dave says not to answer it he'll sort everything out when he gets in.
Visitor	I wanted to let you know about the course - the food hygiene course
Andrea	we've been through that
Visitor	I know, but I thought you might have reconsidered. You were really keen
Andrea	yeah I was, and I would like to but - well you know what Dave's like. He said if I were to learn anything about cooking I could start by cooking him a decent meal every day.
Visitor	Yes, but what do you think about it, Andrea
Andrea	Anyway, there's the money and it's all, you know, difficult
Visitor	Difficult?
Andrea	Buses, you know. Keys and that.

Visitor	What do you mean.?
Andrea	he's taken my bus pass and my keys. Oh my God , is that someone at the door ? It's him back already - you better go now.

what are our initial thoughts

Andrea has a learning disability – she’s misreading her husband’s treatment of her

Andrea is anxious, unhappy and fearful about her current circumstances

Andrea may feel bad about letting the pastoral visitor down by not answering her calls

SO what should our pastoral visitor do?

Wait till Dave arrives and challenge him about Andreas keys and bus pass

Arrange to come back on another occasion when Dave is not there

End the visit by saying don’t worry about the food hygiene course – its not important. What matters is whether or not you are OK

what else should we do

make a note of the conversation and speak to our safeguarding coordinator asap

speak to Andrea’s neighbours or family and ask their opinion about Dave and Andrea

**call the police and report the situation
(only if Andrea wants us to at this stage)**

So the safeguarding courses help us to be aware of signs which could indicate abuse is taking place and guide us into the best ways of responding.

In this church volunteers who have public facing roles which involve contact with children or vulnerable adults must all undergo such training – and most say afterwards how interesting the course they have been on has been. The courses are open to anyone – have a word with Judith if you feel you would like to do one. But

these courses – like DBS checks and all the other precautions – are not ends in themselves. They are the means towards an end. The end of providing that welcoming and safe space for all.

Safeguarding is really about a mindset that underpins all that we do and all that we are. A mindset that says we care and value everyone, and we will do all we can to ensure all people we come into contact with thrive and enjoy the fullness of life that Jesus offers. Looked at things this way we see that safeguarding really is at the very heart of the gospel. It is about us living out and witnessing to the fullness of life that Jesus offers to everyone; its about his unconditional love for all; its about the welcome he gives to everyone who comes to him.

Jesus said *“Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest”* and also *“I came that you might have life, and have it abundantly”*. As his followers we recognise that his mission of bringing abundant life is our mission too and as such we are called to all we can to make those words true in Shirley.