

Sunday 16 November 2025

Liverpool Parish Church

Safeguarding Sunday

‘Every word is like the stroke of a hammer’. These are the words of the great theologian Paul Tillich. They are from one of his sermons, when he was preaching on the prophet Isaiah’s vision of a world whose foundations were being shaken. ‘Every word is like the stroke of a hammer’ – we could say the same of Jesus’ words in our gospel today. He offers us a vision: of the earth shaken; nations divided; families betraying one another; the holiest of temples reduced to rubble.

It is a terrifying vision: but it is not ultimately meant to terrify. It is a reminder that, even as the foundations of this world are exposed, even amidst human conflict and cruelty, God is with us. God is faithful – and ‘not a hair of your head will perish.’

The shaking of the foundations reveals the true foundation: God’s unconquerable love for us. We are made for wholeness, not harm. We have hope because God does not damn us but delights in us.

I want to bear that in mind as I turn towards the central focus of my sermon.

Today is Safeguarding Sunday. It is an opportunity across the church to reflect on what safeguarding is and why it is important. These questions are urgent. We hardly need reminding that the church and the wider world have too often failed to answer them. We’ve let victims down. Worse, we have silenced them and allowed abusers to get away with it or even thrive. This alone should make safeguarding important.

But I realise that, in practice, people in churches can have mixed feelings about safeguarding. It means more bureaucracy – just ask our wonderful safeguarding officer, Sarah Wrightson! It means we cannot just volunteer for many church activities expecting to start straight away. We have to go through a process of checks. For many roles, we have to take safeguarding training courses before we can go further.

Some people object to this: they might say, I’ve been doing coffee or Sunday school or been a sidesperson at this church for years. Why do I now need training and checks? Am I being suspected of something? Am I not trusted?

I understand such reactions. But I think they come from a misunderstanding. Safeguarding is not about creating an atmosphere of suspicion. It is about creating a culture of real trust, real safety.

People who come to this church should not only feel safe. They should *be* safe. They should come here with assurance that this is not a place where they can be preyed upon. Of course, that applies to children and vulnerable adults. But, in reality, it applies to everyone. Every one of you, every person who worships here, visits here, or comes to an event: they should all be safe. If we believe that God makes us for wholeness, not harm, we must make that a reality.

The policies, the checks, the training: they all exist for that purpose. They are not just annoying bureaucratic add-ons. They express the essence of the good news: that God delights in us; wants us to be safe, whole, fully alive. There is no place for fear and domination in a community which bases itself upon the love of God.

But fine words are not enough. We have heard too many stories of where abuse was allowed to happen in churches. No doubt, those churches had many readings and sermons which affirmed the love of God. But love needs boundaries. It needs to be embodied in a culture of care and respect.

I've had to do a fair few safeguarding courses myself. When I was licensed to this church, I had to take an extra level of leadership training. And I know it's a pain to have to fit it in and do the homework. But I can honestly say that, every time I have done it, I have learned something, become more aware. There have been moments when my eyes have been opened in a way they just weren't before.

And something that has really come home to me is that safeguarding is a matter for each and every member of the church. It's not just something for the clergy or wardens or the PCC. It should be part of our DNA as the people God calls to embody his love.

Think about those who teach Sunday School, who serve coffee, arrange flowers, serve in the sanctuary, welcome people at the door. *All* of them are exercising a ministry, a service, a calling in the name of the church. All of them are expressing something of the welcome, care and beauty of God. All of them will be in situations where they show care for others – and where they might pick up a concern or be told something that needs to be passed on.

None of the people in these roles need to be experts on counselling or therapy or abuse. That's not the point. They simply need awareness, so people are kept safe and real concerns are heard, not ignored.

Safeguarding is a responsibility we all have. But it is also a mark of *honour*: by asking people to take safeguarding seriously, we honour all the ministries people exercise. Just as we honour every person who comes here by ensuring they know that this is a safe space. This is how we live out the good news.

Part of safeguarding awareness is recognising that abuse takes many forms. As well as sexual abuse, it can involve other forms of violence and coercion; controlling people's movements or finances to their detriment; spiritual abuse, where a position of sacred trust is exploited. All involve forms of domination and control which violate a person's freedom and lead to lasting consequences. Abuse scars a person's self-worth. It is the victims of abuse who – tragically - often carry with them a sense of shame. Understandably, it makes it so much harder for them to trust others.

None of us would object to the church taking concrete action to stop its valuables being stolen. Well, the people here are far more valuable than any money or object: we should also act to prevent their dignity and self-worth being stolen. Abuse is no less than a desecration of the image of God in every person. Every life violated by abuse, violence and

control cries out to God, to the God who shared the pain of abuse in the passion of Christ. God hears that cry: and so must we.

With this in mind, I urge you to get to know what our safeguarding policies and procedures are. If you have a particular concern, talk to Sarah, our Parish Safeguarding Officer; or Michelle who oversees concerns about domestic abuse and violence. Don't be shy and don't brush it under the carpet. And to repeat myself: Sarah and Michelle are not the ones responsible for safeguarding. We all are, every single one of us. Only that way do we truly live the gospel of a God who wills our wholeness, not our harm.

Jesus' words in the gospel are no doubt challenging. He shows us the dark side of our world: the crumbling of the foundations of safety, peace and dignity. He shows us this to remind us what really matters.

What really matters is not power and status, whether secular or ecclesiastical. They can become a cover for abuse. Those with any kind of power – including the clergy, including *royalty* – must be held to account. What matters is that human beings are equally created in God's image and equally loved by God. What matters is hearing the voice of victims of abuse and not silencing them.

This is ultimately Jesus' message. If the foundations of the world are shaken, we have a choice. We can face it with despair. Or we can find hope in the unshakeable foundation of God's love. That is the foundation on which we can build with security, trust and freedom – so that we can be challenged and transformed for our good.

When the physical temples of the world fall, we are called to build a temple of living stones. We are called to form a community where all are valued and all are cared for: nothing less than a dwelling place for God.

Fr Steven Shakespeare