



*Chaplaincy of All Saints' Marseille
with Aix-en-Provence
and the Luberon*

*17th November 2024
2nd Sunday before Advent
Safeguarding Sunday*

Reflection

On Friday, along with everyone else involved in ministry teams and safeguarding across our diocese, I had a letter from Bishop Robert. He was addressing the issues that have come to light following the Makin Report into the serial abuser, John Smyth, and the subsequent resignation of the Archbishop of Canterbury. Then yesterday, I was at a diocesan Safeguarding Conference where our Archdeacon, Peter Hooper, stated that he'd found the report "a very disturbing read", that there "was no joy in any of it, but there is learning". Peter went on to say that in our faith, "the journey is from darkness into light". In his letter, Bishop Robert said this: "We must enable our churches to be spaces in which it is permissible to talk about hard things, how we can enable one another to step into brokenness". So what you're about to hear is hard to talk about, but it's something that our church has too often failed to address.

Last month I was having a chatty light-hearted lunch with a friend when, quite out of the blue, she told me how she was desperately trying to make sense of events that had come to light in her neighbouring village. She lives near Mazan and was referring to the now notorious and ongoing trial of Dominique Pelicot - a trial which has shocked French society to the core. There are people here this morning who might be badly affected by hearing details of what's been emerging from the court. Rest assured, I don't intend to go there. However, what's

interesting about the conversation with my friend is the clear lesson that it teaches us about the nature of abusers.

What had struck her so forcefully was the *ordinariness* of the 51 accused: the main perpetrator, now the ex-husband of the victim, is a retired estate agent. Among the recruits for his appalling videos, a fireman, an ex-policeman, a social worker and a local councillor, people who, she said, she might any day have greeted on the village street, completely unaware of their secret evildoing. Because these are *ordinary* men, leading *ordinary* lives, yet perpetrating *extraordinarily* evil crimes. I don't need to list them – you will have read about them. Yet according to those examining the accused, none suffers from any mental illness. The only common denominator seems to be their belief in their absolute right to use or abuse women as they chose. In fact, a common defence has been that no wrong was committed as the husband had given his permission.

This should teach us something about why we need mechanisms to try to keep the vulnerable safe in our churches. We simply do not know what goes on in private lives. We do know, however, how these men became drawn into the horror of Pelicot's crimes: habitual use of pornography which millions use on a very regular basis. Psychological studies show that viewers detach and objectify those whom they watch. This should be enough to set alarm bells ringing and raise serious questions about how it might affect a person's moral compass. Does it open up the possibility of doing further and more serious harm? In the case of the accused, the link seems pretty clear.

We know that people who harbour evil intent against others purposefully target organisations where they imagine they'll be welcomed, places where they might find easy victims. Their crimes are not limited to sexual exploitation. Some, might be on the look-out for lonely older people who might trust them with their money. It could be young children or people with disabilities: vulnerability is targeted. The Makin Report into John Smyth's abuse points out that his victims were well-educated young men from privileged backgrounds, people who were destined for leadership roles in the Church and in society. Their particular vulnerability, which Smyth ruthlessly exploited, was their underlying churchmanship which stressed the need to suffer for Christ.

But churches are by no means the only affected organisations: Scouts and youth clubs, care homes, even workplaces – anywhere where someone who intends harm sees a chance to exploit weakness. In the UK we've recently been learning about what was happening for many years behind the closed doors of that bastion of Britishness, Harrods of Knightsbridge. To the shame of the Church of England, our Archbishop has had to take responsibility for failure to act in the case of Smyth. Sadly, we know what message this sends to those outside our church.

'A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.' (John 13:34). Our duty as Christians is to love and care for those who come into our churches. Our

mission is not to try to protect our organisation's reputation by concealing harmful behaviour. In his letter to the Ephesians, Saint Paul urges: *'Have nothing to do with the fruitless deeds of darkness, but rather expose them'* (Ephesians 5.11-12). People in our congregations rightly expect that every person with responsibility, from the friendly face that greets them at the door to leading members of the clergy, has been properly checked and trained. Parents and elderly people, carers of vulnerable adults, they all expect that we take safeguarding seriously. It's what they'd expect from any other organisation and that's what our safeguarding efforts aim to do. In that passage from Ephesians, Saint Paul goes on to say: *everything exposed by the light becomes visible — and everything that is illuminated becomes a light'*. The revelation of wrongdoing should be our guiding light as we aim to make our churches places of safety. We aim to ensure *a safe and strong place* as the psalmist puts it, where we may worship the God we trust in full confidence. (Psalm 91)

Of course, we're all wise enough to realise that running police and ID checks on people may not pick up on all clever abusers. But having systems in place may just put off the opportunist. It's worth a go. And giving people basic training on how to spot suspicious behaviour is also worthwhile. It's certainly not about becoming unwelcoming communities, but we cannot be naïve. We owe it to victims and to those for whom we care to be "wise as serpents, and harmless as doves". Our Lord wasn't joking when he told the disciples "I send you forth as sheep in the midst of wolves". (Matthew 10. 16-18)

So let's work together to ensure that we keep our eyes open, discreetly contact the safeguarding officer if anything seems rather "off". As Bishop Robert wrote: "We are learning constantly, that safeguarding is the responsibility of everyone, not just a few officers or professionals". I'll finish with the closing words of his letter: "Human beings suffer from what we rightly call 'sin', and some misuse the power they have over others. This weekend, please do join me in a re-commitment to do what we can in the journey towards creating a safer church for everyone."

Christine Portman, Reader