

Sermon for Advent 2: Revd Dr Eliza Getman

Safeguarding and Safekeeping

A blessing for you, for these Advent days:

Jan Richardson, from *Circle of Grace: A Book of Blessings for the Seasons - Luke 3*

PREPARE - A Blessing for Advent

*Strange how one word
will so hollow you out.
But this word
has been in the wilderness
for months. Years.*

*This word is what remained
after everything else
was worn away
by sand and stone.
It is what withstood
the glaring of sun by day,
the weeping loneliness of
the moon at night.*

*Now it comes to you
racing out of the wild,
eyes blazing - and waving its arms,
its voice ragged with desert
but piercing and loud
as it speaks itself
again and again:*

Prepare, prepare.

*It may feel like/the word is levelling you,
emptying you/as it asks you
to give up/what you have known.*

*It is impolite/and hardly tame,
but when it falls/upon your lips
you will wonder/at the sweetness,*

*like honey/that finds its way
into the hunger/you had not known
was there.*

—

I hope you all kept safe during the storm yesterday.

I'm going to preach about safeguarding and safekeeping. Let's get straight to the point: The church has not covered itself in glory recently... we have had some pretty clear reminders that the church is a site of struggle and needs redemption...

For quite some time now there has been a culture of "do as we say not as we do". For all of the roll out of training and policy writing and management of safeguarding narratives, there are some legitimate concerns about practice. I'm going to read you a list of unacceptable behaviours that comes Straight off the Church of England website.

1. "Unacceptable behaviour" is defined as: including actions, words or physical gestures that could reasonably be seen as causing distress or discomfort to another person., e.g. bullying, harassment and/or victimisation. Any of the following listed below could be construed as examples of "unacceptable behaviour" – aggressive or abusive behaviour, e.g. shouting or insulting someone, spreading rumours or gossip designed to hurt someone, discrimination or harassment in particular when related to a protected characteristic under the Equality Act 2010, physical contact that is unwanted, offensive comments/jokes, publishing, circulating or displaying offensive material or pictures (could be violent or pornographic), isolating or deliberately excluding someone, persistent, continuous and unreasonable destructive criticism, unreasonable demands and impossible deadlines/targets and coercion, such as pressure to agree to a particular idea, - e.g. political or religious belief. Please also see The Code of Safer Working Practice.

Human beings are remarkably adaptive. We rationalize and normalize all kinds of unhealthy behaviours because of our longing for connection, for acceptance and for community. We don't always get it right. I have spent my entire adult life Longing for a safe place to land and working to build a safer church.

Bad things can (and do) happen everywhere. I don't want to encourage paranoia. But let's be pragmatic. Let's be realistic and honest with ourselves and each other. We need more transparency and more accountability in the Church of England.

I for one have been deeply disturbed by the performative (and perfunctory) remorse shown by senior leadership in our institution. But this isn't new. The Church of England has been complicit with abuse for generations. It's practically status quo.

A Catholic priest once quipped to an Anglican colleague that he'd rather be part of a church built on the rock of St. Peter than one formed on the balls of king Henry...

How can we, in all integrity, still be having spurious (and frankly unchristian) theological arguments about divorce and women priests and whether or not gay weddings are permissible?

Henry didn't just divorce his wives. He murdered them.

This is the kind of grubby (and dangerous) self-serving leadership and theology and practice we spring from. Let's at least admit it and try to do better.

The Episcopal Church in the United States initially stood against racial integration. They wanted to make damn sure they were on the right side of history when it came to the ordination of women priests and same sex marriage.

There were already women priests when I was child. I could see my future through their ministry. And I grew up in an Episcopalian congregation that was celebrating same sex unions in the 70s before it was even legal. Because we bless and marry people who are committed to loving partnership!!

My South African training rector did her Master's thesis exploring the question of why the "Marriage Alliance" of conservative church organisations found same sex marriage so threatening. The conclusion she drew was that equal partnerships could destabilise the male headship model of conservative Christian heterosexual marriages. Women might need to be seen as fully human and then empowered to be equal partners and even to lead.

I learned through reading the Makin Review that lawyer and serial abuser John Smyth did pro bono legal work for this "Marriage Alliance" to ensure the preservation of understanding and practice of traditional marriage in South Africa.

How many people here today are aware of the Makin review that was published a few weeks ago? Already it's old news. Archbishop Justin Welby was forced to resign and the church is trying to do damage control. But here's the thing: it should just be the start of a wider conversation on transparency and accountability. This is a dangerous opportunity to shake up the church and ask some questions about power and politics and complicity and control. The bottom line should always be how we treat each other. Are we following Christ? Or are we looking out for ourselves and our cronies? Shouldn't pastoral care for people always be the priority? Shouldn't listening to peoples' lived experiences be more important than theology?

My experience of the Diocese of Exeter - particularly at the cathedral and in my attempts to find paid employment - reflects what many other women have experienced here: we shouldn't try to reach beyond our station. The bishop sent me here to St Thomas because, despite the fact that I'd been a priest for more than 10 years and had worked within diverse parishes in the United States and South Africa, I was deemed unfit to employ because I did not have parish experience in England. While I was grateful for the warm welcome and support from this congregation and clergy and lay team, I was still trapped financially in a broken marriage and in an institutional church structure that refused to acknowledge my capacity.

As a rank outsider, I observed an increasingly irrelevant institutional church that was insular and closed minded and so fixated on its own power and status and reputation that it refused to recognise the ways in which it continues to harm particular people. The hierarchy seemed to be more worried about management and policies and appearances than the actual needs of its priests and parishioners.

This is how John Smyth got away with his abuse - because exposing it wouldn't be a good look for senior leadership or the institution. And what you need to remember was that, while he was not a priest, he wanted to be one. He tried to become one. And his theology chimed with many priests in his era. What you need to remember is that he was not born a monster. He grew up in a Plymouth Brethren household. Strictly observant. Punished and punishing. I can only imagine that he learned how to punish others through his own experience of abuse. The stories of what he did to his own children and to other peoples' teenaged children is horrific. Yes. But why are we so horrified? This happens all the time. In households up and down the country and all over the world. And we look away. Are we horrified because he was a de facto church leader? Or because many of his victims were

posh white English boys? There were also dozens of African boys who could have been protected if it hadn't been covered up for so long.

It turns out church leadership knew as far back as the early 80s. African Enterprise is an evangelical organisation based not too far from Durban in South Africa. It's founder and director Michael Cassidy was friends with Ross Mains and other important evangelical church leaders here in the UK. When it was clear that the game was up in England, Michael Cassidy found John Smyth work (and funding) in Southern Africa despite knowing his history of abuse. My South African father-in-law did the book keeping for African Enterprise. And he once took his family including my husband to John Smyth's home in Harare for lunch. My husband remembers his pretty wife and children in the sunny garden. John Smyth even came and spoke at my husband's all boys' school.... A boys' school that still caned boys for bad behaviour. Corporal punishment was seen as normal. And necessary. Spare the rod and spoil the child. But anyone who was beaten at school or smacked by our parents can tell you that we did not in fact turn out ok. We have major trust issues. We are confused about what love looks and feels like. We have to relearn how to parent and how to exercise our own authority.

How do we have these courageous conversations? How do we admit that we have screwed up royally and that we want to practice healing and restorative justice? We start by stopping the pretence that we can never be wrong. We have all hurt people. Because as the adage goes: hurt people hurt people. But healed people heal people and transformed people transform people. I live in hope. That authentic transformation is always possible. We are a people of the resurrection. We believe in impossible things. We believe in new life after death. That is a radical assertion. We can climb out of the graves we have dug for ourselves and we can claim and foster a safer, kinder, way of being in the world. We can say we never want other people to suffer in the ways that we have. We can facilitate people being empowered to speak their realities and being believed and made to feel accepted and safe.

The adult daughter of a clergy colleague recently said that in light of the Makin Review and the archbishop's appalling comments and behaviour, "the only thing the church should do with integrity over Christmas is dim the lights, put out a candle rack for private prayer and reflection, have the priests sit there without their finery, in repentance, and then say the Lord's Prayer and lock up at 10pm each night..."

This is our institutional kairos moment for genuine repentance, genuine reflection; this is our dangerous opportunity for authentic transformation. We could choose now to put pastoral care at the heart of everything we say and do. We still can choose once again to follow Jesus of Nazareth on the way of compassionate care.

In the words of Dan Sadlier:

“Christianity can be confusing but the Way of Jesus was pretty clear:

Move toward the poor

Empower the women

Create space at the table

Throw parties

Widen the family boundaries

Poke holes in oppressive systems

Don’t retaliate with violence

Forgive your enemy

Don’t store up wealth

Be present with people

Heal

Announce

Push back darkness

The kingdom of God is near.”

Prepare the Way of the Lord. Make his paths straight. Amen.