

Micah 6

⁶With what shall I come before the Lord and bow down before the exalted God?

Shall I come before him with burnt offerings, with calves a year old?

⁷Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams, with ten thousand rivers of oil?

Shall I offer my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?

⁸He has shown you, O mortal, what is good.

And what does the Lord require of you?

To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.

Mark 12

²⁸One of the teachers of the law came and heard them debating. Noticing that Jesus had given them a good answer, he asked him, 'Of all the commandments, which is the most important?'

²⁹'The most important one,' answered Jesus, 'is this: "Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is

one. ³⁰Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength." ³¹The second is this: "Love your neighbour as yourself." There is no commandment greater than these.'

Safeguarding Sunday sermon.

On 4th August 2002 Holly Wells and Jessica Chapman were murdered by Ian Huntley, the caretaker of their school in Soham. Their bodies were discovered on 17th August, after one of the largest searches in police history. Huntley was arrested that same day and charged a few days later. He was convicted on 17th December 2003.

Immediately after this, it became apparent that a different constabulary had information on Huntley, that they had not shared. This failure of information sharing led to the Richard Inquiry, which, in turn led a series of recommendations that the government acted on, including requiring that people being interviewed for jobs working with or around children should have their criminal records checked, through the Criminal Record Bureau (now called the Disclosure and Barring Service) before they could be appointed. All of this led to the sudden and huge increase in the work of Child Protection, or safeguarding, as it became known because of the growing realisation that vulnerable adults needed similar protections to children.

It was an absolute sea change in attitudes and actions around how we publicly and practically care for children and the vulnerable. What *I* know of this is that Sarah and I moved to Suffolk at the end of 2008, and I got a job working for the diocese in Ipswich. While I officially got a job as a PA, I ended up taking up a lot of the overload of the system for the burgeoning safeguarding work. The diocese was, by that point requiring CRB checks for clergy, readers and lay elders, and it was a massive increase in work. I spent a surprising amount of time on the phone telling people that they were required to complete the check, and no, the requirement implied no distrust of them, personally, but something that we all had to do, from the bishops to the youth workers. If we allowed no exceptions, then by the power of precedent, we could make it ever harder for potential abusers to work their way into positions of trust from which they could abuse people. I persuaded a lot of people to comply. Some resigned.

I continued to work on safeguarding for the five and a half years I worked for the diocese. During that time I met people who would later be convicted.

I visited one PCC to talk to them about the importance of safeguarding, after which they all agreed that it was very important, but there was no one 'like that' around here. But I knew, through the access I had to the confidential filing, that there had been someone barred from their church. I couldn't tell them, and they remained certain that safeguarding problems were things that happened somewhere else.

I took minutes of the Bishop's Safeguarding Panel, which oversaw the diocese's responses in the rapidly changing world of safeguarding. I spent hours reading a report into abuses in Chichester diocese which appears to have been useless in the end, because it failed to report on Bishop Peter Ball, who was the worst offender of them all. I wrote significant portions of a safeguarding handbook which was rolled out to every incumbent in the diocese. It was replaced a few years later by a national church handbook — we had been ahead of the curve on that one. I argued that we should be doing more to increase understanding of domestic abuse. After I had left it was accepted that the church should be doing more training around domestic abuse.

Twenty years has passed since safeguarding really became a thing. Since then we have been shocked by revelations about public, trusted people — priests, Jimmy Savile. Safeguarding has shone a light into dark corners which some wished would remain dark. It has exposed a world of pain and damage, which survivors continue to suffer from the rest of their life. This work has made us all think more carefully, more deeply, about vulnerability and power. It has made us more aware that those who are publicly trusted — priests and doctors and scout leaders and football coaches — have remarkable power. People with such trust rarely understand the trust, respect or power that they hold, nor how persuasive they can be. This is, of course dangerous if their persuasiveness is used for abusive purposes.

It should be a no brainer that Christianity encourages us to do the right thing and not the wrong thing. Love your neighbour as yourself, as we have heard this morning. We have also heard Micah's take on this, 'to act justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God.' But the context to this is so important. Micah reminds his fellows that (despite all the sacrificial code inscribed in Leviticus), God does not want sacrifices — he wants goodness. Most striking in this passage is the line 'shall I offer my firstborn... for the sin of my soul?' Child sacrifice was still broadly practiced in that time in other nations. Some Jews were tempted to leave the true faith and engage in the practices of Babylon, of Canaan and others. They did this in a valley on the south side of Jerusalem. Jesus, when he refers to hell in the gospels mostly refers to this valley. A hell in which children might be murdered and their killers believe that their god might have approved of it.

No. We must do justly, love mercy, walk humbly with our God.

Another reading we might have heard this morning is Mark 9:42 — 'If anyone causes one of these little ones — those who believe in me — to stumble, it would be better for them if a large millstone were hung around their neck and they were thrown into the sea.'

So, it is clear that we must do no harm. But there are two more aspects of the Christian faith that are pertinent. Firstly — while we often focus on our personal faith encounter, in all practical purposes we have personal faith in order to exert positive leadership within a community. We are examples to others, just as Christ is our example. We do the right thing not for ourselves but for the sake of others and to be a pattern for others — a pattern of care and not of harm.

Secondly, as I said earlier, much of this is about power. What then was Jesus's relationship with power? Though he held all the power of God the Father (and the transfiguration demonstrated his glory to his closest disciples), Jesus renounced personal power. He achieved what he did with humility and love, and not personal impressiveness. He didn't bully the world into change, he loved it into change. And on the cross he submitted to abusive power — that destroyed him, despite his innocence. Since his vindication through the resurrection, we have become more aware of the ability of the powerful to rewrite the narrative to hide their shame. This is the power of an adult over a child to squash their story; the power of almost anyone over a vulnerable adult; the power of a man over a woman in terms of size and

strength; the power of institutions over individuals to cover their secrets. But now, increasingly, the light shines in the darkness and the darkness cannot master it.

There are not abusers lurking everywhere. This is not a witch hunt. But we should be joined together in remembering that this is important. That we must play our part, that we should keep our eyes open and be ready to report things that don't seem right — to your parish safeguarding officer, or to me. We can make an extraordinary difference in this. In the name of Christ.

Amen.