ST BARTHOLOMEW'S, MARESFIELD

SEEKING TO KNOW, LOVE AND FOLLOW JESUS

Statement on the Makin Report and the subsequent resignation of Justin Welby
Presented at St Bartholomew's Church, Maresfield, on Sunday 17th November 2024

Today is "Safeguarding Sunday". This date was put in the diary a long time ago. Its timing is, I suppose, remarkable and gives us an opportunity to reflect on the recent events surrounding the Church of England and Justin Welby's resignation, as the Archbishop of Canterbury.

I don't know what your reaction has been. Anger, shock, sadness, disappointment, confusion, concern..., perhaps like me you have felt a variety of emotions.

I don't know how closely you have followed these events, whether in the mainstream media, or online via social media.

There have been a variety of responses and some of these betray a temptation to make this awful situation about personal agendas that were in place long before the terrible events came to light. Discussions over politics, theology, the next Archbishop of Canterbury and more, should not be at the forefront.

First and foremost, this should be about the victims and survivors of the abuse that was committed by John Smyth over many years. It should be about making sure they get the help they need and the justice they deserve. We will pray for them, shortly.

Those boys and young men were met with a man who, under the guise of religious language, appeared to be taking them under the shadow of a fatherly wing. But instead, they were coming under the shadow of abuse, by a man who caused them great physical, emotional and spiritual harm. It is awful.

We cannot know or reconstruct perfectly the response of those who learned of this abuse. But what is clear is that John Smyth should have been stopped and brought to justice so much sooner. He died in 2018 and never faced earthly justice.

What is also clear, sadly, is that the historic safeguarding and the necessary care and support for those victims, by the Church of England, fell far short of what the church should have provided, as those who claim to share God's heart for the oppressed and vulnerable.

In Isaiah chapter 1, as God examines his people, he calls them to holiness, to reflect his heart. We read of God saying:

16 Wash and make yourselves clean.
Take your evil deeds out of my sight;
stop doing wrong.
17 Learn to do right; seek justice.
Defend the oppressed.
Take up the cause of the fatherless;
plead the case of the widow.

Therefore, moments like these should also be a time of self-reflection for the church. About its policies and procedures, yes, but also the culture in parts of the church where, despite statements to the contrary, the institution is sadly favoured over the individual.

My hope and prayer is that those who are complicit in this failure will be honest and recognise this. Resign as required, make the changes that are needed to honour those victims and regain trust.

A godly response to these things, is to turn away from evil and turn towards what is right – to seek a change of heart. To seek the Lord in repentance and know his forgiveness. We should pray for Justin Welby and anyone else who bears responsibility.

Prayerful self-reflection is a must.

I also wanted to take this opportunity to speak about our own church, here in Maresfield. We must all learn from the Makin report, but I believe we need to distinguish between the realm of the church it speaks about and what happens "on the ground" in local churches. Here at St Bartholomew's, we work hard to make sure our church is a place where people feel safe and are safe.

That is why one of the first things you see as you walk in through the porch is our safeguarding policy, why on the noticeboards and in the toilets, there is information on who to contact, should you or another person you know be suffering from abuse. On our website you will find our various safeguarding policies. If you haven't yet looked at these things. Why not take a look today?

Natalie Ashdown is our safeguarding officer who takes the lead, alongside Pauline and I, in making sure that our policies and procedures are up to date. Natalie is the first port of call if you have a safeguarding concern about something within the life of the church, or if you want to talk about something that has happened to you. You should not be afraid to do this.

Angie, our church administrator plays a big part in helping us to stay organised and takes the lead on DBS applications.

I am grateful to all of them for the ways in which they help keep this church safe.

So long as it doesn't involve either of us, you are also welcome to speak to Pauline or I and we will work with Natalie. Whoever you speak to, you can be reassured that you will be listened to, believed and that we will take appropriate action, often in partnership with the Diocesan Safeguarding team, who are excellent.

The church council, the PCC, reflect upon our safeguarding practices at every meeting. Every person who works with young people and vulnerable adults is asked, where appropriate, for a DBS check and asked to complete the relevant safeguarding training. We are rolling out relevant safer recruitment checks for new volunteers.

Our notices and policies and training are but one part of creating a culture in the life of our church, that is safe. Safeguarding can sound a bit bureaucratic and burdensome, but perhaps we could see it as loving wisdom. Really, it is about creating and nurturing a culture within our church where people are and feel safe and where abuse of any kind is prevented, or identified and dealt with.

With that in mind, can I encourage all of you to consider completing some safeguarding training? The Church of England provides free online courses that you can complete at your own pace. They are really helpful, and I am sure you will gain a great deal, that will benefit you in every walk of life. You can find them on the Church of England Website. https://safeguardingtraining.cofeportal.org/

Let's love each other, by learning to keep each other safe. And we will continue to do our utmost best, by the grace of God, to make St Bartholomew's a safe place to worship and learn to follow the Lord Jesus.

So, let us pray.

Father in Heaven. We begin by praying for those boys and young men, who suffered abuse at the hands of John Smyth. You know them and love them, and we pray that you would help them in their pain. Comfort them, heal them, protect them and provide for them, we pray. Set their hearts on the hope of heaven, where one day all sorrow and sighing will flee away.

We pray that you would bring about change, where change is needed. Turn hearts away from evil towards what is right. Please bring about the changes that are needed to help survivors of abuse. Change policies, change procedures, but above all change hearts and cultures, so that they reflect your love and concern for the oppressed.

And, we pray for ourselves here in Maresfield. We thank you for those who help to keep us safe and we pray for ourselves, that we would play our part, in helping our church be a safe place, where people are loved, welcomed and heard.

We pray these prayers in Jesus' name,
Amen.

Revd Ben Sear
Rector of St Bartholomew's Church
17th November 2024