

THE THEOLOGY OF SAFEGUARDING

Jesus had a very clear message about the most vulnerable people. It is a theme which is replicated throughout the whole Bible, with God portrayed in the 121st psalm as the keeper of Israel. This Hebrew word can be translated as Safeguard, which is God's need and wish for the Church, not only that we are safe, but we all work for the safety of all people. That is affirmed in the theological idea of Salvation.

In both the Greek and the Latin version of the word, the root of the word is safekeeping. The theological imperative of God is the safety of his children. Jesus continues this theme in St Matthew 18, when he places a child in the midst of the disciples when they ask him: "Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?" His reply is revolutionary when he says: "Unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Therefore, whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven". (Matthew 18: 3-5). The power of the Jesus' imagery shows us the strength of his teaching about the most vulnerable in our midst. Yet again, Jesus gives us the example that worldly power is not the most important thing in his world, and that Christians are called to replicate that radical hospitality and celebrate Christ's Incarnation, by the love we have for the most vulnerable in our midst.

There are other examples in the Gospels of Jesus holding up the poor and vulnerable elderly as examples of great faith, as in the story of the widow, who brings her gift to the Temple. He holds her up as an example of humility and generosity. Jesus teaches that, in the Kingdom, people are judged by what is in their hearts and how they put their faith into action, rather than the learned, like the Pharisees who know the Law, but fail to put it into practice. Theologically, the Church of Scotland has committed to trying to ensure that everyone is free from the risk harm and abuse. This stems from the Gospel imperative that Jesus loves everyone, particularly those who are the least, the last and the lost in society, and wishes everyone to be safe and cared for, particularly those who are vulnerable.

The other side of this coin is that we know there are some people who worship in our congregations, or who might wish to work for the Church, who present a risk of harm and abuse to vulnerable people. For of such is the Kingdom of Heaven Report 2009, is the Church of Scotland's understanding of our theological attitude to Forgiveness, and how we support and manage people who pose a risk to vulnerable people. At its heart is an understanding that people who survive abuse should be cared for and not be placed in a situation, where the hurt they have experienced can be perpetuated, even inadvertently, by our actions. This means that in discipleship terms, someone who has abused, can no longer be allowed to be in a place of leadership within the Church and they must be accountable for their continued discipleship journey. Forgiveness can only be given by the survivor. The Institution of the Church does not have the right to forgive an individual on behalf of anyone who has been abused. It may be that someone who has been abused may not be able to forgive the person

who has abused them, and the Church should never make anyone feel obliged to forgive the kind of abuse they may have suffered. The Church should rightly leave that great responsibility and right to God. It is also important to remember that forgiveness is not about forgetting. Jesus still had the scars on his body after the resurrection and everyone lives with their own scars. People who survive abuse have hidden scars, and the Church should ensure that, as an institution, we do not add to their scars.

The person who poses a risk of harm and abuse and wishes to continue to worship within the Church of Scotland is required, as part of their discipleship journey, to recognise they are under the authority of God. They, like everyone who seeks to live out their discipleship, must try to acknowledge what they have done and how they have done it, and seek to find ways to amend their behaviour and to repent of their sin. This acknowledgement may only be to God, but it is hoped that with the support of the local congregation, and by bible study, prayer and reflection with the Minister and others, they might find a way to live with what they have done and to live safely. Safeguarding is at the heart of God's will for everyone and while it is sometimes challenging to incorporate its requirements into the life of the congregation, its foundations assure us that God's love requires us to place the most vulnerable at the heart of what we do and who we are. This ensures that in the Body of Christ, we encourage everyone to live fully, radically and in God's love and safekeeping.