

St James' Church, Weybridge

2 before Advent - Year B – 2024 – Safeguarding Sunday

Introduction and Call to Worship

Jesus is the supreme example of life lived to the full, lived in the moment. He points to God's time – not ours and offers his own life as a sacrificial gift for all people, all time and eternity. Today we'll think about how fear of tomorrow empties us of today. May we trust god in worship and give thanks for life in all its fullness.

Today's Readings

First Reading Daniel 12:1-3

A prophecy of the end of times – it will be a time of anguish, but also a time of deliverance.

Gospel Mark 13:1-8

When Jesus predicts the destruction of the Temple of Jerusalem, the disciples want to know more. He talks about the end of times and warns them not to be led astray by others who claim to be him. The tumultuous times he predicts will be only the beginning.

HOMILY *"Tell us, when will this be, and what will be the sign that all these things are about to be accomplished?" (Mark 13:4)*

Today the Church of England is marking Safeguarding Sunday, as we seek to ensure our community is inclusive of all, safe for everyone. Today we recognise that every person in church needs to know why we do what we do and what part you can contribute to helping to keep everyone safe. The theme and focus for this year is – 'Let's talk about it'- as we work to prevent abuse and create a world where every person, child or

adult, can feel and be safe. And let's be frank, the Church of England has a lot still to do.

This week, with the resignation of the Archbishop of Canterbury, Justin Welby, we are reminded that those in authority and all who work to support them have a duty, morally and in law, to report those suspected of abuse and to the very best of our ability, keep all children, young people and vulnerable adults safe. If we can't manage that in church, then where can we?

For those who have experienced abuse, it is life changing and challenging. I for one am sincerely sorry that the church as an institution and as individuals, has failed people over many, many years, sometimes the most vulnerable, by not doing all we can to prevent their abuse and then, not dealing with allegations appropriately.

Today, we owe it to them to ensure our safeguarding procedures are robust, and that every one of us as Christians is vigilant – everyone has a role to play in keeping people safe here in Weybridge Parish. Our parish clergy along with our parish safeguarding officer Donna Miller, are always happy to talk through your thoughts, ideas or concerns. Our notice boards have useful information for people to contact if they need to report a concern and there is more information on our website and of course the Diocese of Guildford and national Church of England pages.

As Archbishop Welby has fallen on his sword in recognition of his own and the wider failings of the church in this area, so we recognise that nobody is perfect, except of course our Lord whom we follow - which is not an excuse for our failure, but a recognition that human beings in leadership do make mistakes. Just take a look at some of the first followers of Jesus; Peter, James, John and Andrew are four of the most celebrated Christians in the history of our faith.

They are Apostles and Church leaders. And I hate to break this to you, but they were flawed as well, as Mark reveals in his illuminating Gospel account. These people are very ordinary, down to earth and yet quite extraordinary because they also cope with the whirlwind of God's love outpoured in the life, ministry and teaching of Jesus, who prophesies the unthinkable: the dramatic destruction of the beloved Temple in Jerusalem.

So, they ask, "When will it happen?" And, "How will we know?" Their concern is palpable because the Temple was an awe-inspiring building. Its predicted destruction must have seemed impossible, dreadful, beyond belief. Our Lord's prediction was realised in AD 70 when the Romans destroyed Jerusalem and the temple was raised to the ground, a devastating blow for the Jewish faith and people of that City.

Jesus is not finished, because there is more; a warning to come! *"Beware that no one leads you astray. Many will come in my name and say, 'I am he!' and they will lead many astray."* (Mark 13:5) So the disciples – that is us today – have a warning from the Lord of life and love. We must listen carefully to what God is saying and not be led astray by the doomsayers and false prophets of our own time. We must look out for those who seem nice, kind, genuine and yet have other motives. We must be alert, watchful and waiting.

The Christian calendar as we now have it sets the birth of Jesus as "year zero", but scholars and theologians have worked out that it was originally miscalculated – so Jesus was born sometime between 7 and 4 BC. Perhaps the precise date is irrelevant for it is what the event means that matters – God coming among us in human form to bring about a change of relationship with and within creation itself. And Jesus is the new Adam, the one without sin, who set's an example of inclusive love for us to follow.

Now our Lord knew that his disciples, human as they were, would have doubts and fears and he tries to teach them about the inevitability of change and how they must be watchful and alert, or in other words, be prepared for change, because it is coming – it is always coming! And as we approach Advent our spiritual focus shifts towards preparation and anticipation.

But there is an important distinction between anticipation – a state of prepared, relaxed watchfulness – and apprehension – fear of the future. It's a safe bet that each of us has spent time anticipating a future event. Perhaps it was something we were looking forward to like Christmas or a new job, a holiday somewhere special, or the birth of a child. But it could have been a dreaded event, such as an exam, a business or even PCC meeting, the loss of a loved one, a funeral.

And it's often the case that, when it did happen, it wasn't what we'd expected at all.

This apprehension is a human failing, one the disciples share with us. And how easy it is to live in the past and not for the present. It is even easier to ignore the present and miss what is really going on – a trap – the opposite of being watchful. This is a mistake that others can exploit. We must never turn our sight from the truth and care of others.

Those impacted by abuse in the church – or any other context – have to learn to live life afterwards, and the least they should expect is that we, the church of today are vigilant and attentive to our situation, always looking to call out inappropriate behaviour within the family of faith.

For we can only be truly prepared for tomorrow if we are living in the present, because that is what gives us spiritual dexterity; we can't afford to be just a people of tradition, we need to be people of renewal. And at the heart of it, we can only face tomorrow, if we have Jesus our friend

and guide in our lives and a part of our decisions, at the centre of everything, following his example.

May our church family always be a safe place of inclusion, welcome and family for all, for protecting vulnerable people is at the heart of the Christian message. It requires us to look forward with hope, learning from our mistakes as we remain watchful, striving to build God's Kingdom for all, today. Amen.

Fr Damian Harrison-Miles, November 2024.