

**SERMON PREACHED BY THE REVEREND JONATHAN ANDREW**  
**AT 8AM AND 10AM SERVICES OF HOLY COMMUNION ON 19 NOVEMBER 2017 –**  
**2 BEFORE ADVENT / SAFEGUARDING SUNDAY**

**Zephaniah 1:7, 12-18; 1 Thessalonians 5:1-11; Matthew 25:14-30**

The readings set for today have a strongly threatening tone – they all call us to remember that we are under God’s judgement, that his judgement can come at any time, and that his judgement can be severe. We are accountable for our actions, or lack of action, before our fellow human beings and before God.

Certainly, our human judgement of one another has been very much to the fore over recent months. Revelations of sexual misconduct in the church, media and the arts, and now politics, seem unending, and lead us quite rightly to judge the perpetrators’ actions. Our leaders seem incapable of civilised debate, but instead fight like rats in a sack over their own personal views on Brexit, ever seeking to widen their own sphere of influence by rubbishing even their own closest colleagues – and so we judge them as self-serving egotists. And then we make judgements about financial probity – offshore tax avoidance and the like.

It’s tempting, certainly for us older people, to think that standards of public life have fallen, and perhaps they have, but I can see some positives in the new openness and the loss of false deference. Looking back to my own youth:

- We all knew of the dodgy teacher, scout leader or organist – but we were simply told by our parents to keep our distance.
- We all knew of the Hollywood ‘casting couch’ culture, but we winked at it.
- We all suspected that there was one rule for the rich and another for the poor – as a famous American was accused of saying, “Only little people pay taxes – the rest of us have lawyers!” – but only now do we have some sense of the scale of the issue.

So now we expect to hear the worst – we want to unmask the wrongdoers, to call them to account, and to protect the vulnerable from the powerful. And it’s in that context the Church along with other organisations is trying to establish ways of doing things that help us all think about how we can keep each other safe.

So let me start by dispelling some possible misunderstandings about safeguarding:

- 1) It’s not just about children. Of course, they will be at the top of our list of concerns, but many adults also have their vulnerabilities – the old, the sick, people with reduced mental faculties, the bereaved, people in or recovering from an unhappy relationship – all of us from time to time are in a vulnerable place, where others consciously or possibly unconsciously can take advantage.
- 2) It’s not just about sexual abuse. Of course, this makes the headlines, but abuse may be physical, emotional, financial, and even spiritual – anything which enables the abuser to take something from the abused that leads to his or her suffering is abuse.
- 3) It’s not all about ‘stranger danger’. It’s a terrible truth that most abuse takes place in what we might assume are safe places (home, church, school) and involves abusers well-known and trusted by the victim – abusers are often close family members.
- 4) Yes, it’s about misuse of power, but power isn’t just about formal authority. For example, any well-meaning Christian person, and the clergy in particular, can be open to abuse from the greedy / needy person – the individual who makes enormous demands for pastoral support, and implies that the minister is being deeply unchristian when he or she isn’t

available 24/7 – playing on that underlying sense of guilt that so many of us have, and undermining our sense of self-worth.

- 5) And, of course, we can sometimes abuse ourselves – through drink, drugs, overwork or other addictions – some of us need protecting from ourselves.
- 6) It's not just the job of the clergy, PCC or Safeguarding Team. Yes, we leaders have specific responsibilities about how we organise the church and its work, what checks we carry out on new volunteers and so on, but every one of us has a part to play, for example:
  - In co-operating with safeguarding rules (even when they are inconvenient or seem somewhat tedious),
  - In accepting training to open our eyes to risks and how they can be reduced,
  - And possibly most important of all, in keeping our eyes and ears open and being willing to let someone in authority know if something 'doesn't seem quite right'. Abuse can happen at any time, often when we might least expect it. Of course, cases of abuse in churches are relatively rare, but abuse can, and indeed has, happened in this church family here at St Peter's.

And one final point. In establishing ways of working that help safeguard the vulnerable, we are not just protecting them. We have all read or seen on the television sad stories of people being unjustly accused of improper behaviour and having their lives ruined as a result. In following sensible guidelines, we can also protect ourselves from circumstances in which our friendliness might be misinterpreted or in which we find it difficult to refute false accusations.

I've covered a lot of ground this morning, and we must recognise that we, along with the wider church and indeed all society, are still developing our approach to safeguarding – guidelines will develop and change over time. Also, we must also never forget that we are a church – that we follow a Saviour who allowed himself to be the most vulnerable of all (vulnerable even to death on a cross), but this is not to say that putting ourselves and those for whom we are responsible in harm's way is part of our vocation. Human flourishing, which is the will of God, requires us to maintain a safe environment for all his people.

**Amen**