

Worcester Cathedral

2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday before Advent / Safeguarding Sunday

Sung Eucharist, 17 November 2024

Let us consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds.

(Hebrews 10. 24)

When this passage from the letter to the Hebrews comes round in the lectionary, I am always startled by the word *provoke*. It seems inelegant or pushy – to provoke someone is, in our usual usage, to annoy them. Here we are encouraged by the author to provoke one another to love and good deeds. Other words could so easily have been chosen: encourage, urge, persuade, inspire. Other translations have 'stir up', or 'incite' – both of which are a little more positive, but they still retain that urgency.

Provocation is usually seen as a less than helpful thing and in the past weeks I am sorry that such unhelpful comments have been expressed all too easily. In the days before the archbishop's resignation commentary flew here and there; thoughts shared with the click of a button; and social media was alive with provocative, yet not always well thought out, opinions designed to stir up emotion.

There was little doubt that the archbishop should resign, and it is right that he did so, it is also right that there should be serious reporting and analysis of the horrific, evil abuse by Smythe and the systematic institutional cover up and litany of failures which have multiplied the abuse.

That the truth *is out*, and the report lays down with some clarity the failings of individuals and a culture which supported them, is the shred of good news which we can take from this. After the unhelpful provocation which came from some quarters, it is now the report and how we react to it which we must focus on.

I do not want to make further comment on recent events – there are press releases, statements, articles and opinion pieces aplenty to read, but on this Safeguarding Sunday I want to stay with the word in the letter to the Hebrews which stands out so much in its bold and direct demand. How can we provoke one another to good deeds in the light of a dark week for the Church?

Earlier this year those of us who were interviewed for the post of Dean of Worcester were asked to submit two statements to the panel beforehand; one was a personal vision for diversity and inclusion, and the second was a safeguarding statement. The

statement I wrote and submitted contains no grand plan, nor any new ideas, but a resolve on my part to ensure that safeguarding is a key area of my ministry as Dean and of the ministry of the whole Cathedral.

It is a statement I return to regularly but have done so especially in the light of this week's events. This year has provided a particular focus on safeguarding for all of us in the Cathedral Community. The first part of the year involved much work in completing a significant set of questions looking at every level of the Cathedral's safeguarding and this was followed up with an audit visit and then a report – which was published in October and is available on the Cathedral website. If you have not already done so I encourage you to look at the News section of the website and read more.

The auditors were thorough in their visitation and used the National Safeguarding Standards of the Church of England as framework through which to assess safeguarding at the Cathedral. The Standards are structured around:

- Culture, Leadership and Capacity:

- Prevention:

- Recognising, Assessing and Managing Risk:

- Victims and Survivors:

- Learning, Supervision and Support.

As I said on the publication of the report, we are pleased that the auditors recognised those things we are doing well and our commitment to continue to build on these to ensure that Worcester Cathedral is a safe place for all. The Cathedral's safeguarding committee has already started work on the action plan to look at the report's recommendations, and this week Chapter will be making an important decision about the future provision of safeguarding support.

Much has been achieved in recent years and especially in recent months but again, recent events remind us that we have no room for complacency. Thankfully I now hear it less often but the reluctance of some to comply with safer recruitment processes or training is deeply disturbing. Anyone not willing to comply with safeguarding processes will simply not be allowed to continue in role.

When we hear the letter to the author of the letter to the Hebrews encouraging us to provoke one another to love and good deeds, I am sure that this is exactly the process we must do with safeguarding: provoking so that we have confidence in our approach. For it is about love and good deeds, it is about the very identity of individuals in the image of God. It is about a respecting of life which lies at the heart

of the Good News of Jesus Christ. The Church should be leading the way on such dignity, such championing of life, and yet we have simply not done so.

We must address all that prevents a safer church, a culture where safeguarding is not *added on* but at the centre; a culture where responsibility is shared by everyone. As Dean I am accountable for safeguarding at the Cathedral, but I am not solely responsible. Safeguarding is everyone's responsibility, and I cannot repeat that enough. The failures highlighted in the recent days were compounded by people not doing anything, or not thinking it was their problem. Safeguarding is everyone's responsibility. Yours. Mine.

After the provocation to love and do good deeds, how might we respond to the news which has been revealed this week? The news which has revisited pain and suffering on victims and survivors? News which, focussed as it has been on the archbishop, might leave us feeling unsure?

The lead bishop for safeguarding in the Church of England, Joanne Grenfell, Bishop of Stepney has written to those directly involved in safeguarding. And it is her words I share in response to the verse to provoke one another love and good deeds.

In every sphere of life – as family members, friends, neighbours, colleagues, volunteers, and as churchgoers – there are practical actions that we can take. These include:

- Being attentive to the needs of victims and survivors of abuse if they come forward, offering patient listening and deep care, signposting those who are in need to appropriate support, with prominently displayed information in all our buildings and on our websites.
- Responding well to any disclosures of abuse, setting aside our own biases to be able to recognize that abuse can happen in any church, any family, any culture or context; being aware that, as well as happening in the past, abuse may be happening now.
- Familiarizing ourselves with how to report concerns, for example to cathedral or diocesan safeguarding officers, as well as to the police or social services where appropriate;
- following carefully the policies set out by the Church and by organizations in which we work, study, or volunteer.

- Ensuring that DBS checks are up to date; undertaking training in safeguarding willingly and wholeheartedly.

I want to thank all those who, in every kind of role in the Cathedral, are committed to safeguarding. I know that you will be as determined as I am to continue to make the Church safer every day. Thank you for your perseverance.

The victims and survivors of abuse are foremost in our prayers and we owe it to them to face up to the Church's shameful failings, to care for all who are in pain or distress, and to take clear actions to create a safer church for everyone. Safeguarding gives us the opportunity to be a *better* church as well as a *safer* one. As our blessing this morning says, my Christ our King make you faithful and strong to do his will.

*Stephen Edwards*  
*Dean*