

by
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Readings:

Gen ch.28, v.10-end

Philemon vv.1-16

Gospel: Mark ch1, vv.21-8

This weekend is when we celebrate Candlemas, the end of Epiphanytide: the purple shadow of Lent is lurking on the horizon. The readings set for Evensong are given above, Genesis describing the story of Jacob and the stairway to Heaven, and Mark describing the miracle of Jesus curing an epileptic.

It is rare to visit Paul's short letter to Philemon and the story of Onesimus. Perhaps I will return to it, partly because I met a priest once named Onesimus. He was African, he was filled with the Christian faith, a wonderful man who *propelled* the Christian faith with the energy that often comes from Africa, an energy that we have largely lost. He was good to be with, talking seriously and not-so-seriously.

A change of format now to enable me to let off a considerable head of steam.

During the last fortnight I have attended two Zoom sessions devoted to upgrading Safeguarding. As Bishop Hugh had threatened to have recalcitrants hurled from the nearest cliff, I reasoned that I should comply. Course information was issued online. The first question asked what entered the mind on hearing the word Safeguarding. I replied "boredom, verbosity and weariness". At least I was honest.

In fact it was interesting, if largely common sense. Common sense is boring, we all know it, but remembering it and how to use it was explored at length. People are precious, young and old - treasure them. The zoom sessions had 16 participants, and were well run by Mandy Wells and Simon Vaughan. It was good to see some old friends. We were a mixture of the young and keen and the ancient crustaceans such as your author. The two sessions were good, and I can recommend them strongly to anyone needing to upgrade. Yes, honestly.

It was clear to me that a management structure was needed starting first with the incumbent, then the Safeguarding Officer and the LPVs as a team. In my experience it should start with the incumbent, who should chair a monthly meeting of LPVs. Short of praying for the flock, safeguarding is the most important of an incumbent's responsibilities. It must be. Don't give him/her the opportunity to delegate it.

(Don't you mean drop it? - Ed).

It was also very clear that an LPV, or anyone volunteering to visit, needed to understand as much as possible about a person to be visited. Do the research before rushing in. It is quite easy to breeze into a situation which develops in an unsuspected way, leaving one badly out of depth - possibly even dangerously. Believe me, it happens, it did to me, and as a result of "Pass the Parcel" by everyone at the time, nothing was done until the police acted.

We used to have a meeting of LPVs in St.Minver, which met at Janet Heath's. Gradually we lost numbers, and the group folded. This is a big problem in rural communities as we know, with the few covering more than one job. Certainly in elderly

and rural communities it may be necessary to establish a Deanery oversight. At least that would make use of a level of church organisation that hasn't found a lasting role beyond proving that life continues after death.

The reason for the Diocese leaning heavily on safeguarding is well-known - the revelations of abuse by people in the church. This has come to light with the RC church first, and now the CofE, with victims coming forward in increasing numbers. However, it gets worse. There is a lot of evidence of a determination on the part of the church hierarchy to contain this scandal over the decades. The priesthood appears to have had a free pass from investigation into the consequences of their behaviour. Obviously senior clergy were involved up to and including the bishops, even an Archbishop or two.

In Sussex, after we had emigrated to Cornwall, there was a scandal involving the priest in our village regarding theft. He left, and his successor was warned by his bishop that if the episode "got out", he would go no further. Disgraceful.

But it gets worse still. We were instructed to watch the BBC documentary "*Exposed: The Church's Darkest Secret*" on YouTube. This dealt with the appalling list of abuses perpetrated by Bishop Peter Ball over several decades, following his grooming and his perversions. It was explicit. To say that it was a distasteful experience is an understatement of some magnitude. Watch the film, if you can bear to, and reflect that these were people who had positions in the church, ironically positions in which they would judge others. The reaction of the group was variously revulsion, horror and feeling soiled.

This weak and evil man got away with his disgusting treatment of young people, hiding behind his public image. Becoming a Bishop seems to have been a hobby to cover his real interests. People were strongly supportive of Ball, who was charming and likeable. The very idea of a Bishop accused of abuse was quite incredible. A very public figure, well-known in the world of politics, aristocracy and even Royalty. He rose to become a Diocesan Bishop of Gloucester before being apprehended.

One of the worst involved in covering up was the Archbishop, George Carey, who refused for no less than fourteen years to pass on to the police victims' letters. Saying "Sorry" is not normally recognised in law as enough to explain a serious crime such as perverting the course of justice.

It leaves the church soiled, irreparably damaged. When I think of the numbers of fine Christians, priests and laity, that I and others have been lucky enough to work with, it makes me very angry. I lost any trust in "the church" years ago. Now we all have to live with that loss of trust, undeserved as it is. We have temptations and weaknesses, but life teaches us restraint and control. Safeguarding is very much concerned with self-control.

For centuries the church has been a refuge for those with various problems such as shyness, a lack of confidence with people, etc, and a level of homosexuality surely must have been part of the priesthood and the laity. I would have thought it would have been a significant part of the church community reaching up to bishop and archbishop level. That said, one accepts that, as, for example, in the worlds of art and theatre, their contribution has been of great value to life in all areas. The church has for years refused to admit something which is as obvious as a cathedral in a housing estate. It is another example of the coyness of the church over its organisation and how it works.

However the fall of Peter Ball leaves us with some rather uncomfortable thoughts. What of the sacraments administered by soiled hands such as these? Baptisms, marriages? The Christian church has existed for nearly two millennia, and it has attracted a wide variety of men and women . It is very unlikely that Ball is the only abuser. How many others have there been, and still are?

(The illustrations are of Jesus Christ with the children)

