

1. How can we make our churches 'safe' places? And why should we bother?

Of course, on one level, the answer is obvious: we want to make sure our church community is never a place where abusive, dark behaviours can happen – or at least, limit the risk of such abusive behaviour as far as we can. But I am interested in churches not simply being places which limit the risk of very dark behaviour. I am interested in churches being places where people can flourish, grow into who they were truly created to be, in a community which points, each person and together, towards Christ.

For me, that broader question is quite personal: in the early days of my Christian life, I was involved in church and Christian communities which were fairly typical, straight up and down. But I often found as I grew in my adult life, I would attend churches which on the face of it, felt like places which shared my beliefs. But then as I got to know people, I would find they held some views or angles on life which, if I challenged, led to me feeling at the 'edge'.

Of course, that was not 'unsafe.' But what I realise now, as I look back on my life, is that those experiences put the brakes on my spiritual flourishing. It was not until some wise minister years later suggested I speak with a spiritual director, that I started to explore those questions, those 'really me' bits, that I would say I truly began to flourish. That led me to train as a spiritual director myself, and ultimately to become ordained. So I am deeply passionate about churches striving to be places where people spiritually flourish!

2. That is why I find today's reading from the prophet Isaiah so inspiring!

Alan Paton, the South African author and political activist in that beautiful country's dark apartheid years, had a Christian faith. He was a director of a residential school for adolescent offenders, when he wrote his famous book 'Cry the Beloved Country' which led to him leaving his work and becoming a full time writer and activist. And years later, he wrote the first part of his autobiography which he entitled, 'Towards the Mountain.' He chose that title because of his love of the passage from the prophet Isaiah we read today, talking of the holy mountain: Mount Zion. He said he took his inspiration from the idea of walking towards this mountain.

The Prophet has this vision: he sees the destruction that has been wrought on Israel by its invaders, he sees the faithlessness of Israel's leaders (and their dark behaviours) as being abhorrent in God's loving eyes. He sees the powerful's rigid, exclusive shunning of the weak and the vulnerable and he says no, that's not what God wants on Mount Zion! He says (56.1-8):

'Thus says the Lord: Maintain justice, and do what is right, for soon my salvation will come, and my deliverance be revealed. Happy is the mortal who does this, the one who holds it fast, who keeps the sabbath, not profaning it, and refrains from doing any evil. Do not let the foreigner [a vulnerable reject!] joined to the Lord say, 'The Lord will surely separate me from his people'; and do not let the eunuch [a vulnerable reject!] say, 'I am just a dry tree.' For thus says the Lord: To the eunuchs [rejects!] who keep my sabbaths, who choose the things that please me and hold fast my covenant, I will give, in my house and within my walls, a monument and a name better than sons and daughters [certainly not rejects!]; I will give them an everlasting name that shall not be cut off. And the foreigners [rejects again!] who join themselves to the Lord.....[all] these I will bring to my holy mountain, and make them joyful in my house of prayer; their burnt-offerings and their sacrifices will be accepted on my altar; for my house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples. Thus says the Lord God, who gathers the outcasts of Israel, I will gather others to them besides those already gathered.'

What a vision in a world where hatred, destruction, and rejection were having their day. I don't need to preach on that: the words speak for themselves!

3. And that is why this week feels such a shameful, sad, depressing week for me as a church leader within the Church of England! As the latest scandal within a church – my church, our church, the

Church of England, the Anglican church – unfolded and the Archbishop of Canterbury resigned, I felt various, strong emotions. Anger on behalf of the victims. Anger that once again, the dark activity of one depraved man could cause so much damage to so many young men (yes, they were all men). Anger and frustration that the God who I believe is calling us all to flourishing, and to a continual journey of learning how to let others flourish too (yes, that is one definition of love) – that God’s name is involved in all this; that people will say again, ‘look, there you go, Christians are no better than anyone else, in fact.....!’ How can such activity happen in a community which reads Psalm 91 together? (91.1-4): ***‘You who live in the shelter of the Most High, who abide in the shadow of the Almighty, will say to the Lord, ‘My refuge and my fortress; my God, in whom I trust.’ For he will deliver you from the snare of the fowler and from the deadly pestilence; he will cover you with his pinions, and under his wings you will find refuge; his faithfulness is a shield and buckler.’***

How can that activity happen in a community whose founder said (John 13.33-35): ***‘Little children, I am with you only a little longer. You will look for me; and as I said to the Jews so now I say to you, “Where I am going, you cannot come.” I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.’***

The one hallmark Jesus gave his first followers was that their love for each other would be what defines them. Not their belief in various bits of the creed. Not their ability to throw a good party or concert. Not their ability to put on a funky Alpha course or raise money for people suffering in the Ukraine (though that would be a spin off). Jesus said, if you can’t love each other well, people will not get your message however hard you try. It is that foundational teaching that drives Paul to write what he does to the Ephesians (5.8-9): ***‘For once you were darkness, but now in the Lord you are light. Live as children of light— for the fruit of the light is found in all that is good and right and true.’***

4. So how can we be a place which enables God’s good flourishing and minimises the risk of dark behaviours within our midst? At a very basic, fundamental level it is about some simple checks and balances to follow. We have a safeguarding officer, Jacqui, who liaises with me to ensure such checks and balances are in place. And there are simple checks – and maybe some very basic, half hour training, we ask for people in key roles in the church (council members, others in ‘leadership’ or ‘visible’ positions). For some (for example, pastoral carers or children’s workers) we ask for more rigorous checks and training.

But that is just quick, easy and basic and I hope we can just tick that box and move on to the bigger thing..... which is for us all to be continually learning how we can be people and a place that enables deep flourishing. That listens well. That allows people to be themselves. For me, one aspect is about being ‘un anxiously vigilant’: we don’t want to be a place which strays too far one way or the other on that idea; neither overly vigilant and anxious, nor oblivious and disinterested.

5. Above all, I deeply pray that we will be a place where people never feel ashamed! Guilt is about what we have done, and might have a place for us to move to reconciliation (or it might be unfounded). Shame is about who we are, and has no place. You are loved! I started by talking about how at an earlier time in my life, I felt unable to flourish in some church communities. Fortunately I never felt unsafe, but in a way, that was still a very light window into feeling shame about who I was. And often, people who are most vulnerable are most ashamed.

We might all be vulnerable at times! I am aware I have been more vulnerable these last few months I have grieved my father with my memory not being as good as it was. We have had an example only this week of email scammers, masquerading in my name, trying to extort money from some of us – if we are not on our toes and in a slightly vulnerable place, we are more at risk in such moments.

So may God bless all of us as we pilgrim towards the Holy Mountain.