

Safeguarding Coordinators Service – 12th October 2021

One of the joys for me of this period of ‘opening up’ of society, is the opportunity to get out and about again, visiting churches, schools and other community groups. It’s the part of the role that I like best, that most energises me and of course, the part that I most missed during lockdown.

In the last few weeks, I’ve visited two of our primary schools. I love these visits because the children are always so curious and full of questions – ranging from the obvious: “are you like the chess piece who can only move diagonally?”; to the personal: “why did you become a bishop? What’s your favourite part of being a bishop – and the least favourite part?”; to the deeply philosophical – as one year 6 put it: “are we all just figments of someone else’s imagination?”

Most of all, I like these questions because they make me stop and think. Indeed, when I was asked recently “why did God create the universe?” – I can’t remember exactly how I answered it at the time, but it made me go and do some more reading when I got home – going back to some of the great theologians of the past to see what they had to say about why God created the universe.

In our reading this evening, Jesus says very bluntly “unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.” You may well have heard many sermons before now from preachers exploring what it means to “become like children” – there are all sorts of possibilities from their sense of trust, to their curiosity and inquisitiveness - but for all the possible avenues of exploration, the context here makes it clear that Jesus had one thing in mind above all else. He’s just been asked “who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?” and so he goes on to explain: “whoever becomes humble like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.” This little story is all about humility.

Now, I put it to you that there are two possible ways of learning humility. Jesus suggests here that we can choose to be humble – it’s a choice, something within our own power - a simple choice even between looking for status and

honour and accepting the ‘non-status’ of a child – one who many in society see as ‘not yet’ an adult, ‘not yet’ developed and mature, ‘not yet’ contributing to the economy and productivity. Alternatively, of course, we may have humility forced on us – the process of humiliation where we have status and honour stripped from us. We may not have an attitude of humility, but we certainly find ourselves humbled.

Part of the reason we are here this evening is because the Church of England is having humility forced on us. Our collective failure to protect children and vulnerable adults, our failure to listen to victims and survivors, our concern for our own status and reputation, and our unwillingness to humble ourselves – all mean that we are being humbled – and the very status and reputation we were so keen to protect is now being stripped from us. And we could debate at length whether this is an act of God or a simple consequence of our own mistakes and callousness. But the result is the same – many in society no longer trust us, and find it hard to see that the church is capable of anything good, because they can’t see beyond the terrible hurt and suffering that we have caused.

But there is a second way to learn humility and it is not too late for us to choose this way. It is the deliberate choice to humble ourselves – to stop searching for status or honour, to listen to the cries of those who have suffered and admit that we still have much to learn. Being humble like a child means having a hunger for learning, wanting to know more, not just in the sense of head knowledge, but also in the sense of understanding other people and knowing how we can live well together in community. Jesus then suggests that we can make this choice – we can “become humble” - and there are two elements to this – two steps we must take if we choose the path of humility.

The first is to change – “unless you change... you will never enter the kingdom of God”. Not everyone in the church has yet accepted this need to change. There are some who just want things to stay the way they are. I imagine that you as Safeguarding Coordinators have encountered such people – I certainly still get letters. Sometimes it’s about not altering any of our practices – “why all this fuss about DBS checks and references – I’ve been doing this for years

and nobody's ever asked me for all this paperwork before!" Sometimes it's a reluctance to have think more deeply about why we do the things we do and the impact our actions can have on other people – "do I really have to do another training course - I'm too old for all this – nobody's ever complained about anything I've done!" Change is hard for many people – and that makes your role all the more important – to be continually explaining the need for change, to be patient and kind in the face of all the objections and yet to persevere in contending for change, appealing to people's hearts as well as their minds. Above all, helping people see how central this is to church life – just as we say a prayer of repentance each Sunday, so we show that repentance in our willingness to change.

And the second step on the path to humility, is to put the child at the centre of all we do. Jesus called a child - we're left to wonder if it was a child that he knew or simply one who happened to be standing there, or whether he interrupted a game they were playing, or whether they were stood at the edge of the crowd trying to listen in – but however he did it, he called the child and put them in the centre of the group of disciples. And I don't think the child was simply a visual aid – Jesus wasn't suggesting they didn't know what a child looked like. Rather he was acting symbolically – we might say prophetically. He was saying to the group of disciples around him – this child belongs among you, indeed should be at the centre of your group because you need to change and become like them. And how can you do that unless you are learning from them?

One of our priorities in the Diocese of Leicester is what we call 'intergenerational communities'. It's a way of saying that we want our churches to be for everybody regardless of age and we want them to be places where the different generations mix. But as I was saying at Diocesan Synod on Saturday – we need to face the hard reality that many of churches do not have any children or young people, and if they do, they are either viewed as 'not yet' Christian disciples, or we employ a professional worker to work with them on our behalf – in other words, we keep them at arm's length. So, what would it look like, I wonder, to place the children at the centre of our church life – where they lead us in worship, where they teach us and where we learn to be

like them in our humility. We do of course have 97 church schools in the diocese, and it is my great hope that our new framework for Minister Communities will allow us to build even closer working relationships with our schools such that we can truly put children among us and learn from them.

As Safeguarding Coordinator, you may not think of yourself as being responsible for the children's or youth work in your church – and you would be right – it's not your responsibility alone as Safeguarding Coordinator. But I dare to suggest that if our churches are truly to be safe places for children and vulnerable adults, then you do have a responsibility to be challenging your church about whether they are putting the child at the centre – and whether they are willing to change and to learn.

It's my great hope for the future of our church, that we would truly become child centred – humble and ready to change. So thank you for all you are already doing – by your work you are bringing about change in the church – and I hope you'll use this network of Safeguarding Coordinators to spur one another on and continually encourage one another.