Sermon from Sunday 15th November

The readings were Psalm 91, 1 John 3: 16-24, and Matthew 18: 1-7 & 10-14

Today is Safeguarding Sunday. And it's not an easy topic!

For me there are two main reasons why this is difficult.

The first is that, for many, the *word* 'safeguarding' is a problem – because of all the charged issues that surround it.
Many people have had such traumatic experiences, and been so badly let down by inadequate safeguarding practices, that they can react to the very mention of it.

So if you can, forget for a moment the word that evokes courses, policies, scandals, and whole diocesan departments.
And think what it really means.

As often when preparing a sermon, I've employed a thesaurus.

Guarding: defending, looking after, tending, protecting.

And safe: secure – but also relatives of those same guarding verbs.
GuardED, protected. And crucially, unharmed.
So the two halves of the word relate to the same concept: keeping safe, guarding from harm.

Today's Psalm reading puts it very clearly.

God is called 'refuge' and 'fortress' – places of safety.
Then he will 'deliver', 'cover' and provide 'a shield'. And freedom from fear.
Later the psalmist actually uses the word 'guard'. As well as 'deliver' and 'rescue'.

Today's psalm – in so many words – actually talks about Safeguarding, as what God does for us.
So, stripped of its policy-based connotations, safeguarding is, inherently, a very good thing.
A Godly thing.

The second reason today's theme is tough is again not a problem with Safeguarding itself.
Safeguarding is vital. It is at the heart of our role as a church and as

individuals. And I, personally, take it very seriously.
But 'Safeguarding ***Sunday***'. That's where I struggled.

We have days designated to recognise a variety of things.
Today is apparently World Diabetes Day. Next month we have World AIDS Day.
If you or someone you care for has one of those conditions, it's with you always. And having one day when other people are invited to think about it - that doesn't always sit well with the people who live it 365 days a year.

And it's not just diseases and conditions.
The United Nations calendar also recognises the International Day of the Potato. Remember that on 30th May. And don't forget to celebrate International Coffee Day (1st October). No joke.

But there are much more serious ones, and there the problem is different. If we have things like the World Day of Social Justice (20th February) or World Patient Safety Day (17th September) – can we rank social justice and patient safety lower on our list for the other 364 days a year?

That's why today's subject concerns me.
If there is a specific Sunday on which Safeguarding is in focus – do we risk reducing its impact for the rest of the year?

I truly hope not. Our intention, by marking it, is to take the opportunity to put it at the top of our agenda, using the published material in our worship, to encourage thinking about Safeguarding, far beyond today.

So no. Safeguarding isn't more important today than either yesterday or tomorrow.
And the Safeguarding Sunday material does not suggest that. Its point is to emphasise that Safeguarding is crucial.
It acknowledges not only the people who work in Safeguarding, but also those who have been let down in the past. And no doubt in the present and the future too, because we're absolutely not getting this right yet.
And it is meant to help us all be better equipped when we encounter safeguarding scenarios.

The theme this year's is 'Love Protects'.
The words come from 1 Corinthians 13, where Paul talks about the

importance of love, and what love does. We often hear it at weddings, relating to the qualities of the best kind of loving relationship.
But. And I'm sorry, I'm being technical again – the word Paul uses for love here is 'agape'. God's love. The ultimate kind of love, that we can aspire to, but usually fail to achieve.

If we can achieve that love, it does protect.

But the much more human love – all that some of us are capable of – well it may be designed to protect. But actions done in the name of love often achieve the absolute opposite.

This week there has been the conviction of one 'celebrity' for sexual abuse, and the release of information about the acts of another. Plus suggestions that many more predators – past and present - are still hiding in plain sight. People who have abused their status and power, in the name of 'love' or at least sex, which many people sadly see as the same thing.

These predators are being spoken about clearly now that the story is out in the open. And the whistle-blowers, those who spoke up first, are, rightly, getting credit for doing it.
But where are the people who actually stood up for the victims at the time? Where are the people who noticed and spoke out and made a difference?

That is what safeguarding is. It's recognising an imbalance of power, and ensuring it is not exploited. It's seeing where people are in danger – before it erupts into a crisis – and taking action to stop it. Or speaking to someone else who can take action.
It does not, by any means, always relate to sex. Those with power – of many kinds – can commit abuse – of many kinds. Safeguarding is the process of protection against that abuse. Any abuse.

And yes, this week's horrific examples are in the secular world, not the church.
This time.
We can't be complacent.

It *has* happened in the church. Many times. Power in a church context is different from the power of fame. But in a way it is more insidious. People can be more vulnerable when they trust leaders whose authority is seen as

coming from God.
Leaders who speak words of love, even quote Christ, and still abuse their position, at the expense of those whose care is their responsibility.
It has happened many times. I have no doubt it is happening now, somewhere. And it will happen again.

And that is why we absolutely need to focus on safeguarding.
We can get annoyed when our safeguarding training comes up for renewal. Another thing that we have to do. Tick another box.
But if that training means that one more person is equipped to recognise a sign of abuse or neglect, it is working.
Because each time it happens, somebody, somewhere, is aware of it.
If training means they recognise it, then one more person might be safe.
But it requires every single person to take it seriously to ensure that it works.
Safeguarding is everyone's responsibility. Even those who are 'lucky enough' (I say it tongue in cheek) not to be required to do the diocesan training. We all have a responsibility to those around us. And if something doesn't look right – we speak to someone.

Think of the annoyingly frequent announcement on the train: 'see it, say it, sorted'. In a nutshell, for those of us who don't have a professional safeguarding role, that is what we should do. We don't need a job title to have a responsibility to notice, to speak up, and enable someone who has the skills and the training to act.

Our New Testament reading makes it clear that love involves action. In a safeguarding sense, that doesn't mean we are the ones who should confront a situation. But noticing something that feels even slightly 'off', and then speaking to someone with the skills and experience to evaluate it – that is an appropriate level of being active. And something we can all undertake to do.

And if necessary, forget the word 'safeguarding'. It has too many connotations for some.
Go for 'being a Christian' instead. Following Jesus. Doing what he did.

I saw a post on some thread where somebody said 'The Gospel is all about Safeguarding'. And a senior member of the clergy responded 'I was under the impression that the Gospel was all about the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ'.

And he thought that was a slam-dunk. The ultimate shut down of the conversation.

Well, of course the Gospel is all about the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.
But what did he do during that life? What did his dying and rising mean?

In his life, he taught about protecting the vulnerable.
In today's Gospel story he focused on a child – someone with no physical, economic or political power – and told his followers that that it is life they should emulate. Not the powerful.
And he cautioned them against any activity that would endanger a child, any attitude that would put that child down. He was literally preaching safeguarding.
Throughout his life and ministry, he constantly saw the vulnerable, and championed them.

And as for his death and resurrection - well, what does the word 'salvation' mean?
My trusty thesaurus offers 'rescue', 'relief', 'preservation'.
The Latin verb, from which the noun derives, actually means 'to save'.

Christ came to this world to keep people safe. Not only those he met in his earthly life, but also those who believe in him, however many centuries later.

And we are called to be like him.

It doesn't matter what day of the year it is, and it doesn't matter what we call it.
We 'safeguard' those around us, by aspiring to Christ's example of love, which always protects.
It is both our duty and our privilege.

Amen