

Jesus' ministry was characterised by the upside down and inside out theology of the kingdom: the first shall be last, and the last shall be first; the mighty shall be put down from their seat and the humble exalted, whoever is greatest among you shall be the least of all. Jesus' teaching is rooted in the Hebrew scriptures, developing in his own ministry the repeated command to uphold and protect the widow, the orphan and the stranger – a sort of threefold biblical formula for vulnerability.

In prioritising those who are most vulnerable we are recognising that in the eyes of God, and in Jesus' kingdom-shaped world, the people on the edge, the people who have the least power, are already at the heart of God's purposes – they are first in the kingdom of heaven.

In the gospels we read that in Jesus 'the kingdom has come near' – when he talks about the values of the kingdom he is not just talking about some future eschatological vision, but of an alternative way of looking at the world here and now, a worldview that is liberated from the distortions and oppressions that are so familiar and ordinary that we don't always even see them.

In the inside-out kingdom of God, the feast was set in order that there might be crumbs that fall from the table so that the dog does not go hungry; the field is planted in order that there might be gleanings for the destitute and landless; the loaves and fish are multiplied so that there might be baskets of leftovers to distribute beyond the gathered crowds. The minorized and excluded turn out to be right that the centre after all.

In this kingdom worldview, the widow, orphans and strangers are not just symbols of vulnerability, and a shorthand for the need for charitable benevolence. They are emblematic of God's enduring, steadfast and abundant love: these people who in human terms were most at risk of neglect or being disenfranchised, or exploited, these are the apple of God's eye, held in the shadow of God's wing. They are the objects of divine loving attention.

When we become more like the little child that Jesus places in the midst of his disciples, we become more aware of our own vulnerability, our own dependence, so that we might perhaps ready to be gazed upon by God with that same loving attention.

With this vision of the kingdom, which Jesus sets before his hearers, comes a dire warning: “If any of you put a stumbling block before one of these little ones who believe in me, it would be better for you if a great millstone were fastened around your neck and you were drowned in the depth of the sea. Woe to the world because of stumbling blocks!”

Reading this as a priest, is always a disturbing reminder of what for me is the most significant three sentences in the ordination service. The words are given to the Bishop, and are spoken to those about to be made priests:

“In the name of our Lord we bid you remember the greatness of the trust that is now to be committed to your charge. Remember always with thanksgiving that the treasure now to be entrusted to you is Christ’s own flock, bought by the shedding of his blood on the cross. It is to him that you will render account for your stewardship of his people.”

The failures of the church to live up to this have been made painfully and repeatedly public over the last few months and years.

The various reports have been hard to read, as they analyse the sins of negligence, weakness, and deliberate fault that have led to such terrible trauma being experienced in the abuse itself, and compounded by all the stumbling blocks that have made reporting abuse so very hard, and the stumbling blocks that have led to victims' and survivors' voices being ignored or denied, and to the church not always responding well.

The church has, too often, been a stumbling block to God's precious children being able to encounter God's abundant love.

The church of England has done a lot of hard learning. And there is still much learning to be done – the task of protecting all God's children is rarely perfect and complete, in an imperfect church, and in a fallen world.

Some of the stumbling blocks are deeply embedded in the church's institutional landscape and culture, and their systematic dismantling is a process that requires the church to embrace radical humility, and uncomfortable self awareness.

The millstone by the Galilean lake is apparently still there. You can visit the place where Jesus stood to say the words recorded in today's gospel.

His words are spoken directly to us today, just as much as they were spoken to disciples two thousand years ago.

The child in the midst of us, the vulnerable person within our community: these are the apple of God's eye. We all share, as the people of God, an accountability to God for our common life, for the ways in which we live alongside one another, for our care for one another. And those whose work or volunteering is particularly concerned with safeguarding children and those who are vulnerable bear a burden of responsibility for the way that this wider, shared vocation is embedded institutionally. The excerpt that I quoted from the ordination service is followed by a reminder: "You cannot bear the weight of this calling in your own strength, but only by the grace and power of God."

Just before the blessing, at the end of this service, we will pray for all those in Great St Mary's who are particularly involved with caring for children and people who may be vulnerable, and for the specific safeguarding responsibilities that they carry. We will make that prayer with heartfelt thanksgiving for the way in which so many people in this church community gladly answer that calling. We are all truly blessed in their ministry.

As a community we are called to ‘overcome evil with good’ in the words of St Paul, to build a life together in this place that reflects something of the kingdom of God.

A theology of safeguarding offers an expansive understanding of human community, in which we aim not just to protect our vulnerable members against active evil, but more than that, to model ways of being community that promote goodness, holiness, humility, integrity – together we are to be the good soil in which the word of God can grow in the hearts and minds and lives of every one of us, as we grow to maturity of faith and love, while keeping the child-like openness and wonder at God’s grace.

Safeguarding is, of course, about preventing harm. But it is so much more than that. It’s about having as our cornerstone the love of God that we see in Christ, inspiring us to create and foster environments and cultures in our churches that are conducive to everyone’s flourishing, paying particular attention to the flourishing of those who are most vulnerable to being forgotten or neglected or sidelined or harmed.

This theology of safeguarding leads us to a maximalist rather than a minimalist approach. It's never just about the box ticking, making sure we've filled in the right forms. The paperwork of safeguarding really matters, because it helps make churches genuinely safer – and we are hugely blessed in the diligence and wisdom of Julie, our parish safeguarding officer, in ensuring that we get this right.

The paperwork can be much more than just administration, it can become for us an act of love: a spiritual and practical expression of our participation in Christ's work of love in the world, our commitment to being the kind of community that has as its cornerstone the Christ who came to bring liberation and healing and justice.

These words from Isaiah are how Jesus announced his ministry – these are what he came to do, and to teach, so a Christlike church will embody this same vocation: in the way that we do safeguarding, and in the way that we order our common life, let us pray that we may continue to grow ever more deeply into our calling to be a church that liberates, heals, and brings justice, a church that shares in God's attentiveness to human need, a church that loves like God loves. Amen.