

Sermon on Wednesday 13 November 2024 at St Mary's Hertingfordbury by Rev. Bill Church

Reading: Psalm 77

You do not need me to tell you that Justin Welby resigned as Archbishop of Canterbury yesterday. It has been all over the news.

The reason he resigned was not that he had done anything wrong himself but that he and the institution and systems he headed failed to stop or discipline a prolific wrongdoer. This is in line with the police being blamed for not stopping or catching a prolific thief.

A wider question is why the church and so many other organisations can't get it right. The litany of failure is tedious.

In our own church, the case of a former Bishop of Gloucester.

In our own diocese, the case of Soul Survivor and its founder Pilavachi.

In other churches, the founders of l'Arche (Jean Vanier) and of Emmaus (Abbe Pierre) were later discovered to have been multiple abusers, and not to speak of Bishops and priests and monastic orders running schools all found to have been abusers, and examples from American megachurches.

In the world of business, there were the cases of al Fayed and Jeffrey Epstein and, in showbiz, Jimmy Savile and Harvey Weinstein and many others.

In sport, there have been justified complaints from cycling, gymnastics and football academies.

All too often, this only surfaces after the abuser is dead, such as al Fayed, Jimmy Savile, and indeed Smyth, whose abuse led to Justin Welby's resignation.

Why does all this happen?

Common denominators of the individuals and their organisations seem to be: regularly – success, often - genuinely good work arising from their other activities, always - power and the willingness to use it to dominate, to gratify their own desires and to intimidate.

And why did those who should have been noticing and acting not do so?

Sometimes the mechanisms are lacking. Smyth was associated with the Church of England, but not in orders nor in any formal position from which he could have been deposed, and a recent case from Bradford found there was no procedural way to dislodge the suspected abuser.

Often the offenders are manipulative and may, in the Christian context, exploit teachings about forgiveness.

Frequently, the world is blinded by the abuser's charisma.

Sadly, some organisations are unwilling to cast aside the goose that lays the golden eggs.

Regularly, there is timidity or fear - and it can be well-justified fear - of retaliation or lawsuits.

Other ingredients are complacency ("There can't be anything wrong in our excellent setup"); friendship (reformulating the notorious comment about betraying your country rather than your friends, or, as I am sure was the case with Smyth, that he was "one of us" to those who should have acted); or being incapable of seeing the truth because of the high standing of the offender or the reputation of the institution.

It is important to get this right - or at least less wrong than it has been.

Important because obviously it will save from harm some who would otherwise suffer, and important also to avoid hasty over-reactions such as in the case of Bishop Bell of Chichester. If the original complaint had been properly handled and investigated, it would almost certainly have shown that it was not grounded in fact and an unjustified slur on the memory of a great man would have been avoided.

It is also important to get it right because getting it wrong (again!) just hands ammunition to those who are already hostile to the church.

It would be easy to fall into the gloom felt by the psalmist in Psalm 77 and even, with him, to wonder whether "the right hand of the Most High has lost its strength" (v.10).

Important though safeguarding undoubtedly is, it is not an end in itself but a means of supporting the core work of the church which is done day in and day out in parishes and chaplaincies. It is our job to do that job with love and care and vigour so that it outshines the darkness of recent events.

In the second half of the Psalm, the psalmist's spirit revives and he remembers: "You are the God who worked wonders and declared your power among the peoples."

Go on in that strength.