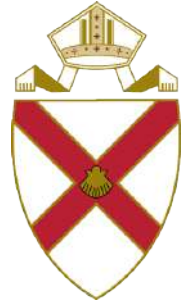


THE BISHOP OF ROCHESTER

The Rt Rev Dr Jonathan Gibbs



All Clergy and Lay Ministers
Church Wardens – Parishes in Vacancy
Parish Safeguarding Officers
Diocesan Staff

15 November 2024

Dear Sisters and Brothers,

Safeguarding Sunday

I am very aware that as we approach Safeguarding Sunday this weekend, many of you, including many in your congregations, will be experiencing a range of emotions from the events of recent days – shock, sadness, anger, and even despair.

As we continue to absorb the appalling reality of what has been laid before us in the Makin Review, and as we sit in sorrow and lament for the damage caused to all the victims and survivors, as well as to their families and friends, it may seem impossible to know what to say.

If it is of help, I share with you an extract from a sermon I will be giving this Sunday. I invite you to use it in any way you find helpful.

My message from earlier in the week is also available on the [diocesan website](#), and there are helpful materials from [thirtyone:eight](#), if it would be like to use them.

Finally, please share with your Parish Safeguarding Officers, church teams, and all those who work so hard on the ground alongside you in your church to ensure it is a safe and welcoming place, how grateful I am for all that you and they do. There is so much good taking place at the grassroots, and it is hugely appreciated.

With my prayers and best wishes



Jonathan, Bishop of Rochester

Safeguarding Sunday Sermon, 17 November 2024
The Rt Rev Dr Jonathan Gibbs

Extract

Matthew 18:1-14

As we gather on this Safeguarding Sunday, the Church of England is in the midst of probably the biggest crisis it has ever faced over safeguarding. This is a major crisis for the whole Church and especially for its leadership. The Archbishop of Canterbury has taken “personal and institutional responsibility” for the failures revealed so starkly in the Makin Report, but it cannot end there.

This must be a watershed moment for the Church of England as a whole – and particularly for the leadership of our Church at the national level, and by that, I mean the Bishops (and I include myself in that) and the Archbishops’ Council, who have a key role in shaping the culture of the Church and the way in which priorities are set, and resources are allocated.

I believe there has been huge change in recent years at the grassroots level, where there is fantastic, dedicated work being undertaken by clergy and lay people, by Parish Safeguarding Officers and Diocesan Safeguarding Teams, to ensure that our churches are safe, healthy and nurturing places for all. And I want to say a huge *thank you* to all of you who have been working so hard to strengthen the quality of safeguarding in our parishes and Diocese. I recognise that this has demanded a huge amount of time and effort on your part, whether to undertake training or to ensure that people on the ground understand what good safeguarding means and put it into practice week in and week out. Thank you for all that you have done and are doing right here and now.

And the second thing I want to say is sorry. Firstly, and most importantly to all victims and survivors of church-related abuse in this Diocese and beyond, and to all those close to them who have been affected. But I also want to apologise you in the parishes, that while you have been faithfully working so hard to keep people safe, we are still finding that the national leadership of our Church has fallen short – and not just in the past but right up to the present day.

The Makin Report revealed failings in the last decade, and I believe there are still ways in which the senior leadership of our Church risks perpetuating these mistakes, because people still do not fully understand the powerful and insidious nature of abuse and because we still do not have the tools needed to identify and address signs of abuse at their very earliest stages.

In Matthew 18:1-14, Jesus talks about the place of children in the Kingdom of Heaven, about our responsibility to protect them and about the need therefore to put children (and here I think we can add all vulnerable people and particularly victims and survivors of abuse) at the very heart of everything we do.

Jesus said, “Let the children come to me, and don’t stop them.” And he went on, “Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.”

Sisters and brothers, we need to understand that children are at the heart of the kingdom of God. They are not an optional extra! And we need also to understand that unless we become like children, unless we become child-like in our attitudes and our behaviour, then we will never enter the kingdom of heaven. That’s what Jesus says here! So, what does that mean for us and our churches? Well, there is something about childlikeness that is to do with open-ness and honesty and being ready to ask questions and trusting people and crying when we are hurt and when we recognise that we have hurt others – and of course there is so much more besides. This is about relinquishing our love of status and position, and our ideas of what leadership looks like and how leaders should behave. It’s about letting go of deference but

nevertheless treating others with respect, and especially those who are often regarded as less important or not worth listening to. For all these reasons and more, safeguarding is not an add-on after we have done everything else in the life of the Church – it is and has to be absolutely central.

If we are to change fundamentally as a Church, if we are to meet the challenges laid out in the Makin Report (and in many other reports too) then I believe we need to undergo a complete shift of orientation. We need to turn around and face in a different direction – which is what the Greek word *metanoia*, which we translate as *repentance*, really means. We need to put children and vulnerable adults first. We need to become like children. We need to let go of our love of power and status. We need to rethink our priorities and the way we use our money and resources. And we need to change from the inside out and from the top to the bottom – but most especially at the top!

This is not just about safeguarding. It is about the whole culture of the Church of England. It is about putting children and childlikeness at the centre of who we are and what we do. It is about being obedient to Jesus and to his words here in Matthew's gospel. Because when we do that, everything will change, so that the Church becomes more and more a safe and healthy place for all.

Jonathan Gibbs
Bishop of Rochester