

St Nicholas Church, Prestwick

The Thought for the Week

Sunday 21<sup>st</sup> March 2021

“She was only walking home” – “Reclaim our streets” - those two placards placed amongst hundreds of others in tribute amongst the banks of flowers at the bandstand on Clapham Common this past week really hit home as I listened to the news reports about the murder of Sarah Everard.

I can fully understand why women of all ages came out in their hundreds to take a stand and to honour Sarah, for so often it looks as if society is fast asleep while so many horrendous incidents occur in our communities. Many of those women said that it could have happened to any of them, and some of those interviewed shared their experiences of being harassed, humiliated, terrorised, attacked, and that fact does not seem to list high on the priorities of those in authority, those who make our laws to do something to prevent it once and for all. Statues seem to be of greater import!

The wave of shock that we have witnessed these past days is misplaced – these women are only saying what we have known and seen and shushed all along.

Now, the momentum is gathering pace – women on social media, in print and broadcast media, in the public arena may well be bringing us to a turning point in how we human beings see and treat each other in 21<sup>st</sup> century Britain. How we, together teach and bring up future generations so that our children, of whatever gender identity, are not seen or treated as targets of opportunity for abuse or harassment or attack. So they are not perpetrators. These women are confronting evil.

But it is not, should not be a woman’s task alone. Let’s face it – these attacks and assaults of women is by men.

So something has to change among those of us, the half of the population, which does not identify as female.

This abusive behaviour is nothing new, but it is, in our time, apparently, at last seen by many – not all – recognised as a wrong to be dealt with – no longer ignored or excused or swept under the carpet.

As the actress and screenwriter, Emma Thompson, so aptly put it, “This has been part of our world – women’s world – since time immemorial.”

For years women have been terrified to walk the familiar pavements of their towns and cities because of sexual predators.

How barbaric is this truth in what is supposed to be a civilised society.

A culture of toxic masculinity still seems to infuse our culture, and I believe that as well as within the home, the Church has a huge role in teaching children about the inherent value and dignity of every human being.

It was our Lord Himself who did more to elevate the status of women to a position of high honour and respect than any man alive or dead. Does that statement surprise you?

History is replete with examples of how men used their superior size and strength to intimidate, dominate, and, at times, abuse women.

There are still cultures and religions today that treat women on a level beneath men.

History has not been kind to women.

But Jesus changed all that.

The cultural attitudes of Jesus' day were quite deplorable. There was no such thing as equal rights. Women were treated as second class citizens, chattels. Until Jesus came along.

Jesus was the first feminist.

He respected, valued and loved women and wanted to raise them up out of the horrible living conditions they faced. You only need to read through the Gospel narratives, and you see how He treated women with honour and respect – think of the Samaritan woman at Jacob's well, for instance. No self-respecting Jewish Rabbi would have given this woman, with such a nasty past, the time of day. But Jesus did – He held out to her hope and help.

Think of the woman caught in adultery, about to be stoned to death by those in authority. The Pharisees didn't care about her. They only wanted to use her situation to trap Jesus. But they were no match for the love and grace of our Lord. And when they had gone off, He said to her, "I am not here to condemn you. Now go and leave your life of sin!"

In that same spirit of love and respect the New Testament teaches men how to treat their mothers and women in general. It teaches that a real man never intimidates, dominates, or abuses any woman – ever!

Fathers are to be a model for their sons how a real man treats a woman. He does so by example – by the way he treats his own mothers, his wife, his sisters, his daughters and all women.

He teaches his sons old fashioned values such as holding a door open for a lady, of stepping aside to let a woman go first. He shows his sons how a man protects and provides for his wife and daughters.

And he demonstrates how a real man takes care of his mother and father when they reach old age.

A real man holds high standards for the way his sons treat women.

What we are facing now, as a country, as a people, goes straight to the core of what it means to affirm and promote the inherent worth and dignity of every individual, and to cultivate in the home, and in the Church, the ethics of care.

It is our call, as Christians, to teach each other, our brothers, our sisters, our fathers and mothers, our daughters and our sons – about how each of us is made in the image of God, and how each person must be treated with respect and dignity.

It is a sin; it is a crime; it is an abomination before God to treat another individual, one of God's children, as simply an object, a means to an end.

The role of our Church in responding to the fearful things that happen to women on our streets may be small compared to the roles others might play, but we must not fail to do what we can.

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