

It's two and half weeks now since the Makin report into the horrific abuses of John Smyth and the cover up that kept him from being brought to justice. It's 2 weeks since the Archbishop of Canterbury resigned taking '*personal and institutional responsibility*' for the '*the long and retraumatising period between 2013 and 2024.*'

I want to share some reflections on what has happened and how we might respond, but before that I want to give you all the opportunity to talk about your own thoughts, feelings and experience of these last few weeks.

I want to do that so it's not just me speaking on a subject which has, at it's heart, senior leaders, including bishops, setting the agenda and getting to decide what is and is not 'ok'. And also because I suspect that many of us are carrying strong and probably complex feelings, and it's good to be able to share them with one another.

As you do that, a couple of really important things to say. First, nobody has to join in and only those who want to take part should do so - and anyone wanting to sit out should do so without any need for an explanation. And it's also fine to join in, and not to say anything.

Second, if you do take part, please be very, very careful with each other, remembering that there will be people who are directly impacted by what has been happening. Please make sure that everyone has a chance to speak while everyone else listens without comment. This is an opportunity for anyone who wants to, to say what they need to say, and to do so without further conversation. It is likely that there will be different feelings and perspectives expressed, and that needs to be ok.

Third, please remember that there is support available for anyone who needs it - including here today, and that there is external, independent and confidential support also available. Details at the back of the room. Please make use of any of that if it would help.

With all of that in mind, we'll have 15 minutes now to talk together. There's no specific question and we won't be opening up for a wider plenary afterwards - this is simply a space for you to say whatever you want to say, and to listen gently to each other.

There is, of course, serious work to be done on our safeguarding processes following the Makin report, including work that arises from the recommendations of the review. And that work has already started.

And that work needs to build on all the good safeguarding practice and culture that we already have in this diocese. The steady and attentive work of safeguarding in our churches, schools and community projects, the training that we all do, the commitment of our Parish Safeguarding Officers and Diocesan Safeguarding team; all of this was already good and continues to be good. And after lunch Andy Earl will be reporting to Synod on that ongoing work of Safeguarding.

One of the risks of the last two weeks is that we either lose confidence and motivation in the good safeguarding work that's underway, or that we decide it's not really our business, and is somehow an up country, Lambeth Palace problem.

But nothing in the Makin report, and nothing in the horrors that it has revealed, changes the fact that Safeguarding is for all of us - every single person here, and every single person in every part of the church. Nor does it change the confidence that we can have in the safeguarding work we are doing here in Cornwall - work that was clearly affirmed by the recent independent, external safeguarding report.

As I say, Andy Earl, the Diocesan Safeguarding Officer will be reporting on that steady ongoing work after lunch.

I want to talk about one way in which I am trying to make some kind of sense of what we have discovered over the last two weeks.

I've heard lots of people expressing all kinds of thoughts and feelings over the last couple of weeks; but one stands out - it's shame; shame that the church has hurt so many people so horrifically. Shame that survivors, who needed powerful people to protect them and to stand up for them, found the opposite as powerful people chose to protect themselves and their friends and the church. Shame that we have said 'never again' before, and yet, here we are. Shame that all of this makes the ministry and mission of the local church harder, when it was already difficult.

Here's what one academic has said about shame - *"Shame requires of us that we have some notion of how we should be; the kind of person we ought to be, and the kind of person others ought to expect us to be, in terms of which our actions show us to have failed, to be deficient, to be diminished. When we are ashamed, we have lost face because the face we value and hope to have, has been displaced or defaced by another face, which is one we regret having, one that disgraces or embarrasses us."*<sup>1</sup>

We want to have the face of Jesus Christ, but that beautiful face has been replaced by a face that disgraces us; the face of failure, cover up, and abuse.

And the Old Testament understands shame well. For the people of Israel, shame isn't a feeling, but a state, and it's a state that is there for everyone to see. In Psalm 89 there's a powerful image of shame as a cloak wrapped around you - the prophet Ethan says of King David, who has committed a great evil, '*You have cut short the days of his youth; you have wrapped shame around him like a garment*' - as if shame is robe that has to be worn out in public for everyone to see.

It's like the opposite of the glorious coat of many colours that Joseph gets to wear as a sign of his Father's pleasure in him; the cloak of shame is a sign of public disgrace.

Perhaps the Church of England is wearing the cloak of shame at the moment.

And who wants to wear shame around in public like that? It's beyond uncomfortable isn't it - I know that people in your communities are likely to be asking you about it; about whether the

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<sup>1</sup> Michael L. Morgan, On Shame

church is safe, about why the Archbishop or the bishops failed so badly, about why on earth anyone would want to be part of something that seems to get it wrong so badly and so often. It's like the public shaming that used to happen when someone was put in the stocks, and passers by would see, and sometimes throw things - harsh words, mockery, or worse.

And in the face of this kind of experience there are some real risks, especially when our sense of shame is extreme. Psychology tells us that there are four possible responses to the garment of shame that Psalm 89 describes, and which the church is wearing today; we can withdraw, hunkering down and refusing to engage - '*it's nothing to do with me*'; we can avoid, finding ways to distract ourselves from the cause of our shame, or to pretend it's not really as serious as it seems; we can attack ourselves, blaming ourselves in increasingly harsh ways; or we can attack others, blaming them for the difficult feelings we're carrying.

Withdrawal, avoidance, attacking ourselves or attacking others. And we've seen all of those at work over the last two weeks - perhaps in others, perhaps in ourselves.

But perhaps this cloak of shame is what we need to wear for now. Makin revealed terrible failures which shame us - and we know that others have been hurt by the church as well; in previous safeguarding scandals that have been on front pages, and in other, more hidden ways, in churches up and down the country, including here in this diocese. Perhaps there is a lesson in the Old Testament for us - that when terrible things happen, there are consequences, and they are public, and it feels like wearing a cloak of shame.

In all of the darkness of these last weeks though, there is a thin thread of hope that I can discern; it's fragile and not always easy to see, but it's there; like a narrow way that's travelling from darkness to something brighter; to a future in which the face of the church looks more like Jesus; in which we haven't run away from shame, or tried to cover the cloak by withdrawing, avoiding or attacking. In which we have worn the shame until, one day, we discover it's has been taken from us.

And in that future, we have chosen the way of humility.

Whereas shame in Scripture is a garment that reveals our sin and that brings about our death, both St Paul, writing to the church in Colossae, and St Peter, in his first letter, tell their hearers about a different item of clothing - they tell people to '*clothe themselves in humility*'. Not a cloak of shame any more, but the simple clothing of humility.

And the New Testament talks a lot about humility. James tells us that God will 'give grace' to the humble. Jesus describes himself as being 'gentle and humble of heart' and Paul, in his great prayer-hymn in Philippians, tells us that it was in Jesus '*not grasping after equality with God*' but '*humbling himself*' that his glory was truly revealed.

Perhaps God's gift to us is the promise that, at some point, we will be invited to take off the cloak of shame, and to be clothed instead with humility.

Because for hundreds of years we have worn grand clothes. We been at the centre of things; people have looked to the church for leadership and guidance; we have crowned Kings and

Queens, been asked for wisdom on matters great and small; we have defined what is right and wrong in our communities. We have been powerful and important and now, while some of those trappings remain, people pay less attention to us, and care less about what we have to say. And now we are having to face up to our terrible failings in the ways we have abused our power, and covered that abuse up and hurt people in awful ways. And all of that is humbling. Humiliating even.

But humility is a great gift and a godly virtue.

Humility means recognising that we don't have all the answers - all we know is that there is One who does, and that our role is to point towards him. What someone described as '*one beggar showing another beggar where to find bread*'.

And humility means putting the people who have been hurt by the church at the centre of our thinking; survivors of abuse, those who we have not listened to, the people who we've looked down on or ignored or excluded.

And humility means recognising that we are just as broken and sinful as everyone else, and that church isn't a holy huddle of special people, protected from a dark world 'out there', but the community of the broken, in which we get to practice loving God and each other, and offering hospitality and serving the world that is also suffering. The beautiful call to the church to be a *hospital for sinners, rather than a museum for saints*.

And humility means recognising that any power or status that we have in the church is always and only for the good of others, for the protection of the vulnerable and for service to the communities we love - and not for our own benefit or preservation.

And that means also that a humbler church will never, ever rely on bad theology which says that the way we get people to their knees doesn't matter, if it means they come to faith, because a humble church knows that the way we live today shows people what we think matters in eternity.

Having said all of that, I don't know quite what a humbler church will be like, nor exactly how we get there because it's a new way of being that we're invited into and we haven't had to do it like this before – but I do know that it's the call that's made to us in the darkness that we are now in, and I hope and pray - with all my heart - that when the time does come, and we are invited to take off the cloak of shame, we will choose instead to be clothed with humility.

And in that future, our face might be more like the face of Jesus Christ, which is always turned towards the world with love. And if so - if we have the courage to be clothed with that godly humility - we will be more like the church he calls us to be. May it be so. Lord have mercy.

A prayer taken from the Church of England liturgical resources offered for safeguarding and a safer church.

Let us pray

Eternal light, shine into our hearts,  
eternal goodness, deliver us from evil,  
eternal power, be our support,  
eternal wisdom, scatter the darkness of our ignorance,  
eternal pity, have mercy upon us;  
that with all our heart and mind and soul and strength  
we may seek your face  
and be brought by your infinite mercy to your holy presence,  
through Jesus Christ our Lord.  
Amen.