

Resignation of The Archbishop of Canterbury



It is with a heavy heart that I write the following lines.

Justin Welby, Archbishop of Canterbury, resigned this week as he put it ‘with a long-felt and profound sense of shame’ about safeguarding failures within the Church of England, specifically ‘the long-maintained conspiracy of silence about the heinous abuses of John Smyth’, a conspiracy of silence in which Justin Welby now acknowledges that he himself has colluded.

I want to make the following points, and I do so within the context of two parameters. Firstly, the Gospel text Mark 13:1-8, set for the Second Sunday Before Advent (17th November), speaks of judgement and the need for very careful discernment. Jesus says to his disciples, “*Many will come in my name and say, ‘I am he!’ And they will lead many astray.*” And a few verses previous, “*Do you see these great buildings? Not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down.*” The Judgement of God is both terrifying and profound. Secondly, this particular Sunday just happens to be Safeguarding Sunday when we in the Church are being asked to specifically reflect on the importance of our own safeguarding practices. We recognise that we are all vulnerable and that we, together, all share the responsibility for being vigilant.

Ensuring that the culture within our congregations is wholesome and healthy is a priority – knowing that safeguarding against abuse of whatever kind is unacceptable and will not be tolerated and that, without question, anyone who is a victim of abuse knows that their voice will be heard and that we will act and respond appropriately.

I want to be clear in saying that Justin Welby has not resigned, despite what his statement says, because of failures within safeguarding within the Church of England. He has resigned because he has been exposed of gross negligence in the managing of a specific case involving John Smyth, a sadistic paedophile, and with whom Justin Welby worked in the past. It is Justin Welby's own silence and collusion that has led, rightly, to his resignation. Had he done what he should have done then tens of young boys would not have had their lives destroyed by sexual abuse. You have every right to be angry with Justin Welby. And I have to say that I, along with a good many other clergy, share in that anger.

A number of Bishops, and indeed the Archbishop of York is one of them, have been quick to articulate how sad they are that Justin Welby's career has ended this way and how still, they admire and are thankful for his ministry. I remain silent on this – at least for now. Now is not the time to deflect away from such negligent behaviour and the devastation caused to so many young lives. Neither is it right to rush to speculation on who the next Archbishop of Canterbury might be. This too only detracts from the grievous harm that has been caused.

What has been particularly galling for clergy in this whole debacle, and it is another reason why Justin Welby has lost all confidence from those of us who serve in the parishes, is the fact that some bishops, deans and priests have on several occasions abided by rules and regulations in relation to safeguarding protocols that Justin Welby himself has advocated with often brutal consequences for some exonerated of any wrongdoing. It would seem that he himself has not abided by the rules of his own making. Justin Welby has long voiced the message that there can be no conspiracy of silence in the face of abuse. Yet he has stayed disgracefully silent.

I would not be surprised if, over these next weeks and months, we see a number of other resignations. This story is going to continue to dominate headlines for some time.

This is all very painful for us and it makes the job of a parish priest and of all of us who faithfully worship God, love our Church, and do our very best to care for our neighbours, all the more difficult.

Be reassured that across all of our Benefice Churches, we take safeguarding very, very seriously. We do not and will not collude with anyone who victimises vulnerable people. We want the best for everyone, and we want everyone to know that here in our midst you are safe, and you can flourish. It is at the very core of our ministry and mission.

Our thoughts and prayers are with those who have been abused and victimised by John Smyth.

Revd Mark Bailey