

Draft notes for talks by church or faith groups – White Ribbon 2007
(Suggested for use on 30th November)

Christ the King

Sunday November 25th is the festival of 'Christ the King'. Originally instituted by Pope Pius XI in 1925 against a rise in secularism to bring back the sovereignty of Christ, it was set for the last Sunday in October. After the 2nd Vatican Council the calendar reforms of 1969 moved the date to the last Sunday before Advent, which is when the Church of England and the Episcopal Church now observe it.

November 25th is also the first of 16 days of action for the 'International Elimination of Gender Violence' or 'White Ribbon' campaign, which ends on December 10th which is Human Rights Day.

Why November 25th?

On the night of November 25th 1960 in Dominican Republic three sisters – Patira, Maria Teresa and Minerva Mirabel, were killed as they returned from visiting their detained husbands (who were political opponents of the dictator Rafael Leonidas and had been imprisoned and tortured on several occasions). Twenty years later in Bogota it was decided to commemorate the murder of the Mirabel sisters as International Day against violence towards Women.

The first white ribbon campaign was launched in Canada in 1991 after the brutal mass shooting of 14 female students at the University of Montreal. A group of Canadian men were outraged by the crime and started the campaign calling on fellow men to **neither commit, condone nor remain silent about violence.**

In 1996 in South Africa the National Network on Violence against Women launched their own White Ribbon campaign and many of the country's women's groups quickly adopted the white ribbon as a symbol in their nationwide struggle against the high levels of violence. Activities based on the campaign have taken place in Suffolk since 2002.

November 25th is also informally known as 'Stir up Sunday'

Church and faith groups across Suffolk have been invited to join many other organisations today to

- a) raise awareness of the harm that domestic violence and abuse causes families and the wider community,
- b) to pray for those who are abused (emotionally, financially, physically or sexually) by someone they love or live with, or an ex-partner, or family member.
- c) to remember also the abuser - that they may change their behaviour, and all those who work in the field of domestic violence and abuse services - that they may be strengthened in this work, and
- d) to provide information on the support available locally (see notice board for details). So let's together be brave enough to talk about this complex, personal issue – to 'stir up' awareness, and conversation and action.

View of a King

Historically as nomads the Israelites had not needed a centralized government, but after settling in Canaan the tribes had to join together to withstand the attacks of other peoples, and to win victories over their enemies. Eventually Saul was anointed as King and approved by the people in this role. The success of the kingship led the people to invite David to take Saul's place after his death. Besides being chief general in war, the king was supreme judge among his people (2 Samuel 14 v.4 and 2 Kings 8 v.5) and leader of their worship (2 Samuel 6 v.13, 17 and 18). He was

regarded as the Lord's representative (1 Samuel 24 v.10) and David's dynasty was founded on a covenant with him (2 Samuel 23 v.5).

So what makes a good King? The Bible is full of examples of good and bad leadership, wise and not so wise decisions. The three readings today provide powerful images of Kingship, which are extremely relevant to the issues of domestic violence and abuse, which is very much about power and control within relationships.

The definition of a monarch includes 'a supreme ruler' with the term monarchy stressing total autocracy and loyal royalism. It is like the King of a Castle in sole charge of those in his principality. For where there is a King then there are also subjects or servants who will live under his rule, whose lives will be controlled by him. One could say that throughout history cultures and legal systems have been defined by those in positions of power. Use of violence has been considered an act of entitlement, based on the 'rights' of the 'powerful' over the 'powerless'.

In the Jeremiah reading we hear of shepherds who had not done their duty, their flock scattered and dispersed. The role of the shepherd was a very important one, and it is clear that their dedicated duty was to guard, keep together to protect, to 'tend' for his sheep who look to him for this presence against those factors that would harm them; the rocky cliff face, the weather, a predator. Sheep were the most valuable possessions providing meat, milk and clothing. Because of their value the Hebrews used them for tribute (2 Kings 3 v.4) and for sacrifice. Kings and officials are called Shepherds. But in this context the shepherds lead not drive their sheep. A king is coming - the reading concludes - that will rule wisely, maintain law and justice in the land. Illustrating two male roles as shepherd and king, roles with responsibilities for others more vulnerable than themselves.

Paul's letter to the Colossians focuses on the supremacy of the Son of God as the head of the body, this is a common image, (we are called to be the hands and feet – the doers, action takers) the head makes decisions, controls and the body can not live without the head. And this primacy or superiority is one of all created things. A King that 'rescues from the domain of darkness' his followers are therefore secure, can live free from fear, their release secured and their sins forgiven. We are told 'all things are held together in him', but not for negative power – The aim is to 'reconcile the whole universe to himself, making peace' for all.

So how do these two readings with male images of leadership assist us?

There are male victims of domestic violence and abuse, now approximately 20% of the total of those reporting incidents to the Police in Suffolk (some in single sex relationships where another man is also the abuser, some in heterosexual relationships) however women still predominantly experience the most severe physical and sexual assaults at the hands of men; their partner, husband, ex-partner or member of their family. And although Suffolk is the safest county in England - women have been murdered by their partners, ex-partners or family members.

Although there are many adverse factors which may be present in relationships such as stress, family breakdown, financial demands, ill-health, infidelity, alcoholism or substance misuse, or other problems – these do not cause domestic violence and abuse. It is chosen behaviour on the part of the abuser to establish and maintain control over another person within an intimate relationship or family.

Today as part of an International campaign (which runs until 10th December) we are challenged to think about, raise awareness and consider the actions we as a Church

community should take in response to the misuse of power. This is not an easy issue to tackle, but appropriate that on 'Stir-up Sunday' that we should do so.

The role of the man in a family or relationship

What is the role of a man in a family or relationship? There is nothing wrong with acting like the superior shepherd over the sheep, or the 'King of the Castle' as long as this is balanced with respect and equality. One person (male or female) making all the decisions may be something you both agree on. However, ruling in a dictatorial way, insisting your way or no way, enforcing what happens as opposed to negotiating, and then imposing sanctions as a punishment, is not a Christian model. The home (regardless of size of castle) should be a place of nurture and safety, not of fear, abuse and assaults. Cruel words harm lives as much or sometimes more than blows – they definitely take longer to heal.

Those of us who have not experienced this crime may find it hard to realise why victims stay. In the main, they love the person who is abusing them, and although they want the behaviour to stop, they don't want to call the Police or prosecute. The person who is hurting them will also tell them it is their fault or due to something they have done/not done. Quotes, often taken out of context from the Bible can also be used to intimidate a partner or hold them in chains for their beliefs and marriage vows. A word on suffering – the story of the cross is not to tell us to endure all hardship, but specifically the hardship of discipleship. Our third reading from the Gospel of Luke brings the most poignant example of what Kingship is – one of sacrifice, ultimate forgiveness of others. Jeered, scorned, wronged and the reaction is not to retaliate, as he have could quite easily - but to endure and forgive. This portrayal of the sacrifice of Christ should not be used as a mantle to encourage a victim of domestic violence and abuse to stay in an unsafe situation, or endure and forgive, without escape. But it certainly can be used when abusers say that they acted under some perceived provocation.

Domestic violence and abuse is a serious health issue. Both physical and mental health will be affected. Children living within this environment will face additional barriers to achieving their full potential in life, be it academic, social or economic. Men can be amazingly effective role models to the children in their lives. Or not! Former US Attorney General Janet Reno said that 'Domestic Violence is the root cause of every social problem we face'.

The New Testament tells us that 'husband and wife must love and help one another' and the husband is the 'head'. (Ephesians 5 v.22, 23 and 28. Colossians 3 v.18). Although this too must be understood in the context of Christian equality 'neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female – all are one in Christ Jesus. (Galatians 3 v.28). And although Peter gives instructions to wives 'to accept the authority of your husbands', he also goes on to say to husbands 'to conduct your married life with understanding; pay honour to the women's body, not only because it is weaker, but also because you share together in the grace of God which gives you life' and further on 'Be full of brotherly affection, kindly and humble minded'. (1 Peter 3 v.1, 7 and 8).

As Christians what can we do?

Jesus said 'when two or three are gathered in my name, there also am I'. We may ask what we can do in the face of something that seems so tragic, so complex.... in text language it would be written 'WWJD?' or another words - what would Jesus do? This should be our starting point, and we know the answer. Would He walk on the other side of the road?

As Christians we affirm loving, respectful relationships so we should also be brave enough to consider the issue of patriarchy, examples of inappropriate use of control, and be willing to look at our own use of power in everyday situations.

The main thing is to be willing to talk about this issue amongst ourselves as a church community, our families, friends and colleagues – so that those in darkness can access the light. For those who are being abused to understand - it is not their fault, they are not alone and that support is available. For those who are abusing their partner or family member to understand – this is not acceptable, that support is available for them to change their behaviour.

Following publication of the Church of England guidance on domestic violence issues, and an input to Diocesan Synod earlier in the year, we are also being given an opportunity to find out more about this issue, and explore our response as the 'hands and feet of Christ', through a presentation offered to Deaneries and/or Parishes by a team including Kathleen Ben Rabha (Diocesan Community Affairs Advisor), Catherine Prophet (Diocesan President of the Mother's Union), Chris Yule- (former Chief Crown Prosecutor and now Lay Reader), and Marianne Fellowes (County Domestic Violence and Abuse Projects Manager).

If you are personally affected by this issue, or know someone who is, or may be in the future – there is a 24hr free phone help line in Suffolk, a dedicated website, support groups and a variety of initiatives in place for victims, their children, wider family and the abuser.

It is no coincidence that the campaign ends on Human Rights Day. The Act in 1998 set out several articles including the 'Right to life' and the 'Prevention of torture'. The United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights says 'recognition of the inherent dignity and of the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family is the foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world'.

The family is a place of human flourishing, when it is supportive and loving. When it is like this, it is the 'best thing since sliced bread', but it can be so destructive when one or more people are abusive to others within it. How can we strive for peace in our world if we don't have it in our own homes? The very place where we need to feel safe and nurtured can be a living nightmare of fear, repercussion, emotional torment and pain. It is everyone's Human Right to live free from fear.

This Sunday is also referred to informally as 'Stir up Sunday'. This comes from the opening words of the collect for the day in the Book of Common Prayer of 1549. "Stir up we beseech thee O Lord, the wills of thy faithful people, that they plenteously bringing forth the fruit of good works may of thee be plenteously rewarded, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen"

Closing Prayer

We ask that you Lord, will stir up the wills of those present to respond to these issues, so that the fruit of good works will be seen here in Suffolk. Strengthen those who work in this area, comfort those that suffer, and guide the hearts of those who abuse. In Your name we ask these things. AMEN