

## **Last Sunday after Trinity**

On 9 August last year 29 y.o. Ben Field was convicted of the murder of a retired schoolmaster, Peter Farquhar. Especially shocking about the story was that both were active members of Stowe Parish Church. The older man had been there for decades; he had taken the younger man, who was the son of a Baptist minister, as a lodger. The older man was gay but committed to a celibate lifestyle. He thought he had an emotionally but not sexually intimate friendship with his lodger. Field became secretary of the PCC and deputy churchwarden. Farquhar became ill, having strange episodes and turns. His young lodger spread it about that he was suffering from dementia. He wasn't; he was being poisoned. Farquhar changed his will to favour his new friend. One day he was found dead by his cleaner. An inquest recorded that the cause of death was the man's alcoholism. It was later decided in court that he had in fact been suffocated by Field. But before this came out the young man was continuing his pretence. He offered for ordination and had entered into a process of vocational discernment with the Diocese of Oxford – a process that culminates in what is called a BAP, a selection conference (Bishop's Advisory Panel) where it is decided whether you have a genuine calling and can proceed to training. A few days before he was due to attend his BAP conference Field was arrested under suspicion of murder. It turned out that the young man had also been working at a hospice in palliative care and had targeted scores of older people.

During the court case he was described as having a personality disorder that 'included a lack of empathy, a callous lack of concern for the feelings of others, and an incapacity to experience guilt'. He was described in a psychological assessment as a psychopath.

Ben Field is of course a very extreme case but church congregations – as any other community – have always been vulnerable to the possibility of those with less than pure and Christian motives grooming their way in and causing immense damage. Didn't our Lord himself warn in the Sermon on the Mount of false prophets who 'come to you in sheep's clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves.' (Mt 7.13)

That is surely the subtext of our NT reading and situation of the church community in Thessalonica. Paul contrasts his ministry with theirs:

*our appeal does not spring from deceit or impure motives or trickery*

*As you know and as God is our witness, we never came with words of flattery or with a pretext for greed*

There were wolves involved that had groomed their way into that community and Paul is anxious for them for he knows that they are lambs. How do you spot a wolf? A Ben Field? This week a report has come out that seeks to draw lessons for Stowe Church, for the Diocese of Oxford and for all of us. Just a week before we have had the ICSA report on the failures of the Church of England with regard to safeguarding and how it failed to spot the sexual predators in our midst including two former diocesan bishops – Peter Ball who was Bishop of Gloucester and Victor Whitsey, sometime Bishop of Chester. The ICSA report is a shaming catalogue of what is mostly naivete and incompetence that has added insult into injury for the many victims of these and too many other sexual predators. Wolves.

We do take safeguarding much more seriously within the church today – the procedures and training required, the protocols to be followed are exhaustive, time-consuming and, frankly, cumbersome, but they must be done and they must be seen to be done. It is actually all part of loving our neighbour. We've had to lose our innocence over this. Christian lambs have had to grow horns – we have to be more streetwise, with our eyes open. Jesus wished that his followers could be as gentle as doves but also as wise as serpents – and you need to be. I can offer you my assurances that in my view we at St Andrew's are following all the right procedures and we take the greatest care. I can offer you my assurance that safeguarding issues are top of the list for what

keeps me awake at night. I absolutely feel the sense of responsibility for it. But you must not just take my word for it. It is the responsibility of the whole church and, in particular, of its church council members to be vigilant, to lift up the carpet and look underneath, to check, to ask questions, to be open-eyed. There always have been wolves in the fold and we should be alert to it.

How do we spot them? How do we know the genuine from the imposter? Here are a couple of thoughts that Paul gives us:

‘We never came with words of flattery’. Do not be beguiled by charmers. That doesn’t mean charming people aren’t decent people but neither does it mean that they are. Don’t just be taken in by words – look for evidence of good character. Some evidence of Paul’s good character was that he never asked for money – ‘we never came with a pretext for greed’ – and never played his cards close to his chest – ‘so deeply do we care for you that we are determined to share with you not only the gospel of God but also our own selves’.

And look at the cost to Paul of his ministry:

*We had already suffered and had been shamefully mistreated at Philippi.*

Abusers are not primarily out for sexual gratification; they are out to exercise control, they are intoxicated by the power they have or can have over people. They do not like to be weak or vulnerable. The real thing – true leaders – true holiness is cross-shaped, it dies to self.

But it is not always or even ever easy to spot; the wolf looks like a lamb. I feel really sorry for the Christians at Stowe Parish Church; they have lost a dear brother to a callous murder and they must also be bewildered by how what they thought was good and honourable and holy was actually demonic in its evil. Their whole community and fellowship has been violated, desecrated. They will never be the same again.

But in the end you know what this shows is what the church is here for and the battle we are summoned to fight – as we say at baptisms, against sin, the world and the devil. There is light and there is darkness and we are called to be bearers of the light and principally we do that by given ourselves in obedience to following the twin commands of loving God and loving our neighbour. It is to love that we are called - and that love is sometimes battered, deceived, stretched, taunted. But it will triumph. Love does, because God is love and God is God: he has the last word.