

Sermon at All Saints, High Wycombe – 10th March 2019

Becoming milk and honey to victims/survivors of domestic abuse

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Readings:

Deuteronomy 26: 1-11

Luke 4: 1-13

May the words of my mouth, and the meditations of all our hearts, be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen. Please be seated.

I'd like to begin by thanking you for inviting me to be your guest preacher this morning. It feels incredibly important to come and speak to you about my research around domestic abuse, and I feel particularly privileged to be doing so both on this 1st Sunday in Lent, but also on the Sunday following International Women's Day, which was celebrated this Friday gone.

Just to say a little about myself, I work as a Lecturer in Criminology at the University of Leicester and I've been researching domestic abuse for about 15 years. Outside of work, amongst other things I'm a clergy spouse, and I quite recently spent two years enjoying life at Ripon College, Cuddesdon whilst my partner was training for ordained ministry there. I was fortunate enough to enjoy worshipping here at All Saints on a number of occasions, and nowadays I worship in the Diocese of Leicester.

My research has most recently focussed on churchgoers' experiences of domestic abuse and how churches respond. I've been working with Professor Kristin Aune at Coventry University and the incredible Christian charity, Restored, who train and mobilise churches to end violence against women and girls. In partnership also with Churches Together in Cumbria, we've surveyed churchgoers throughout Cumbria, across a broad range of denominations – 438 participants in total.

I'm going to share some of the key findings of this research, but first, I want to focus in on our Deuteronomy reading, in which the Israelites recall God's grace in bringing them to a land flowing with milk and honey, and free from oppression. What I would like to consider with you this morning is how we as the church can today be a land flowing with milk and honey – particularly for victims/survivors of domestic abuse.

For too long it has been a misconception that domestic abuse is only physical violence, or that this is the 'worst' kind. Yet, it is much broader than this. In our survey we also asked about emotional forms, such as being isolated from friends and family, or being repeatedly belittled. We asked about financial forms, such as having to account for all of your expenditure, or not having access to household finances. We also asked about being made – with or without force – to take part in unwanted sexual acts. Unlike most secular surveys of domestic abuse, we asked about spiritual forms – being stopped from taking part in religious practices, being mocked or ridiculed for your faith or belief, or being made to take part in religious practices which you are

uncomfortable with. All of these acts, and many more besides, are abuse when they are associated with control and fear.

1 in 4 churchgoers that we surveyed had experienced at least one of the various behaviours that we asked about in their current relationship. Emotional forms were most common. Both men and women reported being subjected to abusive behaviours, although on average women experienced a higher number of abusive behaviours, at a greater frequency, and with more extensive impacts. For example, perhaps the most sobering finding is that six women are *currently* in relationships where they are in fear for their lives.

Those six women – and no doubt many others who weren't surveyed – are likely sitting in the pews of their Cumbrian churches right now – and my prayer is for their safety and for a change in their circumstances. But of course, they aren't just in Cumbria – there are women, men and children who bear the physical and emotional wounds and scars of domestic abuse, current and historic, in churches everywhere. This can be hard for us, as churchgoers, to accept – that victims/survivors may be sitting in *our* churches. But they almost certainly are. Furthermore, not only are there victims/survivors in the pews, the lunch clubs, even the vestry – but so too are there likely to be perpetrators. Sadly, being a Christian and being a perpetrator of domestic abuse are not mutually exclusive: over half of the churchgoers that we surveyed who had been abused said that their perpetrator was or is a Christian.

We asked our respondents what they thought the Church needed to do to improve their response; put another way, we were exploring how the Church could be a land flowing with milk and honey for victims/survivors of domestic abuse. Preachers tackling domestic abuse from the pulpit was mentioned many times. Specifically, challenging interpretations of scripture which prolong the suffering of the victim and fail to hold the perpetrator to account, was a key message. An example of this from our gospel reading today could be around power and dominion, and whether we use it to call out, or to condone and collude with, perpetrators.

We heard about Jesus being tempted by the devil in three consecutive trials. In the second of the three, Jesus is goaded with the prospect of having all the glory and power – if only he will bow down and worship the devil. Who could resist such unparalleled authority? Of course, Jesus can. However, in our humanity and fallenness, it is not always the case that we can. Power can be appealing – it can offer a boost to one's self-esteem; an access-all-areas pass to influential people and exclusive events; the opportunity to push one's own agenda through. Many of us possess some level of power or influence, be it within our family relationships, working lives or in community or social activities – including here in church.

But, if we as church are to be milk and honey to everyone, including victims/survivors of domestic abuse, we need to reflect honestly on who are the winners and losers of our quest for, or wielding of, power. Is it self-serving, or for the benefit of others? If for the benefit of others, are we behaving in a way which upholds existing structures and traditions that can harm or oppress – perhaps out of fear of rocking the boat, or being seen as less trustworthy or amenable by those who wish to maintain the status quo? Or, are we using it to dismantle those same structures and practices – to model speaking out against injustices, and to show those who are struggling to find their voice that they have allies, that we can be milk and honey to them?

If we look to God, we can see power being exercised in ways which are about grace and mercy, not greed and malice. In our Deuteronomy reading, God uses his power to lead the oppressed Israelites to a new land where they can yield, then sacrifice, the first fruits of the ground. God leads them to the land flowing with milk and honey. What are we doing to lead people, especially victims/survivors of domestic abuse, to one such land?

Interrogating power is especially pertinent when we consider how we as church respond to domestic abuse; how we become that land flowing with milk and honey. Domestic abuse is underpinned by power and entitlement that is not only used to oppress the victim/survivor in an intimate relationship, but is socially sanctioned by the fact that very few perpetrators are held to account by the justice mechanisms of the state. Similarly, victims and their children are frequently poorly protected and supported by those agencies of the state.

There are sadly many accounts of how church leaders have used their power to condone or collude with perpetrators of violence and abuse. For example, scripture can be used to suggest that wives' submission to their husbands means that they should put up with being abused, accepting it as their 'cross to bear'. Similarly, much damage can be caused by simplistic teachings about forgiveness which locate the blame with a woman who is unwilling to forgive, rather than with a man who is unwilling to recognise, repent of, and change his controlling and abusive behaviour.

But this doesn't have to be our story. We need to be bold enough to challenge those who deny that domestic abuse exists within our churches, or to speak out when we hear sexist or victim-blaming remarks being made. We need to make sure that we do not allow the status and reputation of an esteemed member of our church communities to provide them with impunity from the consequences of their abusive behaviour. We, as the body of Christ, need to strive towards our authority and influence being used to create that place of milk and honey for victims/survivors of domestic abuse.

I'm going to end with three suggestions for how we can use our power, individually and collectively, to challenge domestic abuse – to be that land flowing with milk and honey to those who are currently being, or have previously been, abused.

Firstly, we need to end the silence. I don't know whether this is the first time that domestic abuse has been preached about from this lecturn – in many churches, it would be – but please don't let it be the last time. Yes, Friday was International Women's Day, but if we are to model ourselves on how Jesus uses power, there should be no limits to our determination to challenge gendered injustices and to work towards liberating people from oppressive circumstances. If we shut down these conversations, we contribute to silencing victims/survivors. Please do visit Restored's website (www.restoredrelationships.org) and download their church pack which is full of excellent guidance on responding well to the practical and theological challenges surrounding domestic abuse.

Secondly, let's build relationships with organisations outside of the church that work with victims/survivors of domestic abuse. We can't, and shouldn't try, to do this on our own. Partnerships enable everyone to benefit from one another's expertise.

Thirdly, let's make visible our commitment to responding to domestic abuse. Let's make sure that posters and information about local services are visible to all of those who pass through our churches over the course of the week. Let's engage in acts of generosity towards, and solidarity with victims/survivors, collecting toiletries and toys for women and children in refuges, for example, and showing them that the church stands with them, not against them. Let's be the Church, the land flowing with milk and honey, for all of God's people, but especially for victims/survivors of domestic abuse.

Amen.