

## 16 Days of Activism Sermon

There is lots to focus on today: this is the last Sunday in the church calendar, before we enter the season of Advent. This Sunday is known as the Kingship of Christ, an opportunity to reflect on how different Christ's kingship is compared to earthly governance – his power most chiefly seen in what is accomplished on the cross.

But today, I want us to think about a particular issue, which is being highlighted as part of the work of Mothers' Union in their campaign: 16 days of activism against gender violence. This campaign begins on 25 November, and runs until 10 December, which is International Human Rights Day.

Every year, Mothers' Union host vigil services, support local refuges, and do all they can to highlight such a tragic issue: that one in three women globally will experience some form of gender based violence. Although domestic abuse is not restricted to women, women and girls are particularly at risk. Having recently become the father of a daughter, and being the husband of a wife, son of a mother, and brother to a sister, I find this issue to be so troubling, and one in which I despair.

However, in this campaign, I see practical engagement, hope, and a challenge to injustice. We might all emulate Mothers' Union in adopting their three pronged approach to social injustice: prayer, enabling, and campaigning. One of my favourite verses of Scripture is in the prophet Micah, here paraphrased in The Message version of the Bible:

*“But he’s already made it plain how to live, what to do, what God is looking for in men and women. It’s quite simple: Do what is fair and just to your neighbour, be compassionate and loyal in your love.”*

There is an online version of this booklet, and I'll put a link in the description below. Please note that as the diary contains themes of violence, it is not recommended for under 18s, and readers' discretion is advised. But for those who would like to engage, there is a thematic structure for prayer each day for the 16 days, along with some suggestions for action.

Let us pray, in a prayer for those working to end sexual and gender-based violence:

God bless you with insight to recognise violence in all its forms, and courage to name it, speaking out for justice. The Lord Jesus bless you with compassion for the vulnerable, and grace to stand with them, sharing his strength. The Holy Spirit bless you with a prayerful heart, and power to breathe peace, transforming the world. The blessing of the holy and glorious Trinity, eternal Wisdom, living Word, abiding Spirit, be among you and remain with you always. **Amen.**

Before I make any comment on the reading for this morning, I'm going to share the Biblical Perspective for the theme of this morning's service, from the 16 days Prayer Diary:

*Mothers' Union's commitment to calling for an end to the scourge of domestic abuse and gender-based violence lies in the heart of our vision: that of a world where God's love is shown through loving, respectful, and flourishing relationships. God exists in, and created, equality of relationship.*

*The relationship of the Trinity powerfully illustrates this; each distinct from but equal to the other; relating together in loving agreement. The equality of human relationships is established at the beginning of creation: "God created human beings in his own image. In the image of God he created them; male and female he created them." Genesis 1:27*

*All are created in the likeness of God, whatever our gender; as such all are entitled to be treated as God's precious children, whose image we reflect. "There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus." Galatians 3:28*

*Thus, any culture of violence against one another, whether physical or emotional, is a distortion of relationships as originally intended; equality and respect in the sight of God.*

*Throughout the Old Testament God's attitude to women is positive and pastoral. There are many instances of women in positions of influence and leadership; also of provision made for those in positions of vulnerability.*

*A woman's choice in marriage is highlighted in Genesis 24:57 and other examples; whilst in Proverbs "wisdom" is personified as a woman. Where instances of violence against women are recorded, they are described as a wrongful action with negative*

consequences e.g. the assault of Tamar by her half-brother in 2 Samuel 13 which led to serious family conflict and bloodshed. God's position remains constant.

*Within Jewish society attitudes began to change towards women through the times of exile and inter-mingling with other cultures. The religious leaders attempted to protect the purity of their race through more restrictive laws, many of which had a negative effect on the lives of women. Thus, by the time of Jesus' birth Jewish men would pray every morning and thank God that God had not made them a Gentile, a slave or a woman.*

*However, Jesus radically challenged this culture through his actions and teaching. He treated women as completely equal to men. He openly conversed with women; met their needs and included them amongst his followers and supporters. He disregarded Jewish edicts when he healed the woman suffering from a haemorrhage for twelve years, choosing compassion over the letter of the law. He revealed his divinity to Martha, John 11:25-26, and chose to appear firstly to Mary Magdalene after his resurrection, John 20:10-18. In a situation where violence against a woman was allowed under Jewish law, that of the woman caught in adultery, Jesus averted the aggression with wisdom and compassion, using the situation to challenge her accusers without condoning her wrongdoing.*

*Thus, the arrival of Christianity transformed life for women. The New Testament indicates that they played a significant role in the life of the early church. They were involved in leadership roles alongside Paul and others; they used their homes for gatherings of believers and had important input into the missionary growth of the church. Relationships between Christian men and women were surely ones of equality and mutual respect. With this perspective there is no room for violence of any sort; whether psychological, physical, sexual, financial, or emotional.*

*However, history has unfolded since New Testament times, both in the church and the world. There can never be any justification for violence against women. In our campaigning against it we seek to follow the example of Jesus.*

*We look for inner change within perpetrators as they are enabled to conduct equal loving relationships, respecting women as made in the image of God.*

*We build our campaign on God's command: to love our neighbour as ourselves. Where this is followed there will be no place for violence against anyone.*

I feel that this morning's Gospel reading speaks powerfully into this campaign. These are the concluding verses of Matthew's Gospel, and is the *commissioning of the disciples*. To be commissioned is to be given authority for a specific task – in this case, the continuation of the transformation that Jesus has begun. A few things stand out to me, which I will highlight briefly.

“Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. When they saw him, they worshipped him, *but some doubted*.” Even some of Jesus' own disciples doubted, and notably, Matthew thinks to include this detail! It's OK to have our doubts – we're all on a journey of discovery. But to engage in faith and to put our trust in the Lord is to become part of a network for transformation.

“Jesus said to them: ‘All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptising in the name of the Father, Son, Holy Spirit.’” The perspective we are being given here is of eternity – Jesus is not only present in the here and now, but at all times and in all places. There will be times that the work we do, and the challenge we seek to bring to social injustice will seem slow, or that it is regressing: we are called to stick at it anyway.

“Remember I am with you always, to the end of the age.” Just because Jesus has fulfilled the promise of the incarnation, does not mean he is now absent. Throughout his ministry, he confronted hypocrisy, sin, and wrongdoing, and challenged people to think and live differently.

What does it mean for us to share in this ‘commissioning’ in today's world? To strive for a world in which gender based violence is a thing of the past could be a good place to go from here. Amen.

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*Year A - The Kingship of Christ – Matthew 25:31-46*

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