

End GBV 2018

Sermon at Salisbury Cathedral, Tuesday 4 December 2018, by the Revd Joanna Naish

Today we are here as we join with the campaign to end Gender Based Violence. It is also the season of Advent when Christians prepare for the coming of Christ; a time when we hope for a world moving from darkness to light.

The prophet Isaiah writes, “The people who walk in darkness have seen a great light.” That prophecy is fulfilled in Jesus, the light who dispels all darkness. So we meet today in his name, and may our voices unite as witnesses for those affected by sexual abuse, violence, coercive control and other gender based discrimination.

The reality of GBV is a real and terrifying darkness. A darkness, where some try to hide or excuse violence shown to people because of their gender. A darkness, where some assume falsely that they have rights over others, rights that prevent their partners from living in freedom, from living without fear. A darkness that hides bruises that will not be shown; where victims end up using lies to protect themselves and their children from those who abuse them.

But how did the campaign to end GBV begin? On 25th November 1960, three sisters were brutally assassinated in a field in the Dominican Republic. The Mirabal sisters had spent years highlighting the cruel and unjust regime of Rafael Trujillo which cause the death of over 50,000 people. And the sisters paid with their lives. But the church, in outrage at their deaths, protested and was joined with support from the International community. The regime was overthrown. Three voices had brought light into the darkness; no longer could denial of the treatment of women prevail over the truth. The light had overcome.¹

In 1999 a representative from the Dominican Republic brought forward a motion in the United Nations that the day of the sisters’ death, 25th November, should be the International day for the Elimination of Violence against women – and the movement began, which resulted in the United Nations Convention to End all forms of Discrimination against Women.

Yet the darkness of discrimination and violence persists. For although 189 countries have signed this treaty, there are significant gaps. The Sudan, Iran, and The Holy See are among those who have not signed – and the USA has refused to ratify it in law, despite much pressure.

People don’t like speaking about it. But not speaking out only intensifies the darkness.

Hearing about our service today, someone said to me this week

“Well it isn’t really a suitable subject for church is it?”

It certainly is; for if subjects like there are hidden from view, we allow people to ignore it and let it continue. There is nothing that cannot be brought to God in prayer; and no injustice that should not be brought into the light as part of our Christian witness.

Gender Based Violence is a worldwide issue, often perpetuated by cultural practices and beliefs. In India, discrimination against women begins before birth – where, because traditionally males have been valued more than females, illegal sex-selective abortions and infanticide of females, in the words of one Indian father ‘happen without hindrance.’

In countries where Female Genital Mutilation is still a part of long held cultural practice, many young girls are forced to submit to surgery which can often prove fatal. In many countries so many assumptions still remain about violence towards women and those of differing sexual orientation.

And if this is hard for us to hear, how much harder must it be for those who suffer ... Christians are called to speak out - to lighten the darkness.

¹ From Elaine Storkey’s ‘Scars Across Humanity’

The Mother's Union is doing much to bring these issues into focus so that something can be done, to voice the suffering, to educate communities and to support victims. May the love and the light of Christ overcome all barriers to reform.

And the problem of abuse is not just in Africa, in India ... It is our problem too. In the last few years, in our small corner of Wiltshire and Dorset, people have said: "Surely, this sort of thing doesn't happen here...?"

Yes, it does.

"Women should speak out if they are being abused by a partner."
Sometimes the nature of the abuse makes this impossible. And... the man who said this to me had interrupted a chat I had been having with his wife.
And – perhaps worst of all – "He only hit her once, but it was when he was stressed!"
There are no excuses. None at all.

For all those who are living in the darkness of abuse, the light will shine in darkness – and the darkness will not overcome it.

Jesus shows really practical and inclusive relationships with women. He talks to the woman at the well who has had five husbands and probably more; there is real communication, and she gives him water. His friends and followers include women, like Mary Magdalene who has almost certainly suffered from mental health issues. When a woman suffering from haemorrhage touches him crossing every boundary of cultural decency in her despair, he does not reject her but makes her whole.

Jesus shows love, acceptance.
And it is women who stand at the cross, women who bury him... and a woman who first takes out the message that Jesus is risen from the dead.
We are one in Christ, all equal in the sight of God.

And there are signs of great hope. Those in authority who show prejudicial and outdated views, like the Irish judge who according to the Guardian, only this week announced that women who use online dating "Would probably sleep with anyone," are rightly challenged and censured. Throughout Britain, we now have helplines and charities that give uncritical and swift support to victims, providing routes to recovery for adults and children alike.

We believe that we are made in the image of God.
And if we allow Jesus to come into our lives we know that in faith we are very members of the body of Christ and we share in his life, holding within us the spark of the divine.

So the words of Jesus we hear today, tell us that this is not something that should be hidden, not covered by a bowl, or under a bed but set proudly on a stand, where that light, in all its glorious colour and radiance can shine in all people.

Around the font at the back of the cathedral are the wonderful words from Isaiah:
*"Do not fear, for I have redeemed you;
I have called you by name, you are mine.
When you pass through the waters, I will be with you;
and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you."*

Hold them and pray them for yourself and for all those whose names cannot be given, for all those who suffer violent, abuse, coercive control; for all those whose voices are silenced...

As we go out, go affirmed as children of light – resolute that we can live in freedom.
We can, in hope and faith and love, break open this darkness and draw others to walk in the path of light.

Amen.