

Mothers Union Service: 16 days of activism to end gender based violence The God of Justice and Love

We come together today to raise awareness of gender based violence across the world, and in this holy place and in sacred time to hold fast to the promises of God: who is faithful and full of compassion, hearing our prayers and the cries of our hearts.

The Mothers Union has been at the heart of a movement across the world, seeking to help humanity flourish in keeping healthy relationships, and the call to end gender based violence is at the heart of its ministry – indeed, of **our** ministries.

Gender-Based Violence: A few facts and figures

- At least **1 in 3 women globally** will experience some form of gender-based violence at some point in their lifetime (*World Health Organisation*).
- In the European Union, **1 in 10 women** has experienced some form of sexual violence since the age of 15, and **1 in 20 has been raped**. Just over **1 in 5 women** has experienced physical and/or sexual violence from either a current or previous partner (*Restored*).¹
- An estimated **133 million girls and women** have experienced some form of female genital mutilation across Africa and the Middle East (*Restored*).²
- More than **700 million** women alive in the world today were married as children (*UN Women*).
- In England and Wales **7 women a month are killed** by a current or former partner (*ONS Wales, Crime Survey England and Wales, 2015*).

There does seem to be evidence of a much greater level of abuse towards women, but we do know that it is not just women who suffer. And men who are affected are much less likely to come forward for support.

Some of us here today will have experienced some really difficult situations in our lives, and so firstly it's important for us today to recognise this and give us permission to safely be in this space.

As Christians we trust in a God who knows us intimately, we don't need not say anything aloud, because God knows what we have lived through, seen and heard, and holds us.

And so we come together today and we hold fast to the goodness of God in this safe and holy space.

It is not God's desire that any of His people go through these terrible situations. When people experience trauma, some find themselves asking "how can there be a God?" It is not God who destroys, but the propensity within us as human beings to want control and power and we are a creation that needs some very basic things in place for us to flourish: like love, connection, relationships, a safe shelter and food and water. When these basic things are not in place, or indeed it is the place of suffering, it is heartbreaking.

¹ Restored, *Violence Against Women is one of the Biggest Issues of our Time*

² *ibid.*

We have just entered into Advent, a season of Hope as we wait for our Lord Jesus again this Christmas and indeed His second coming. Our reading today in Isaiah is perhaps one of the most famous seasonal readings: it is a prophetic vision of the Messiah. Just before our reading today in Isaiah, we are given the image of human evil being destroyed like the felling of a vast forest. Then we get the beautiful image of a fresh shoot coming from the stump of Jesse, the father of David. The Messiah will come from the family of David – this is an important marker to help us recognise that God’s plan was that we would not struggle on earth alone – but that He would come – Jesus – and God’s justice would be known on the earth.

Isaiah helps us to know what to expect of Jesus – that He will not judge as the world judges, He has the poor and those most in need always in mind and will act with righteousness and justice. The wicked will be laid low. Jesus is faithful. And there is this incredible vision of peace – that the lamb and the leopard will lie together, and the lion – perhaps the fiercest of meat eaters in the animal kingdom – will eat straw like the ox. Even though we cannot fully understand it, the promise of God is that this vision of peace will one day be ours. Until that day, we are called to place our trust in Jesus, who will never leave us nor forsake us. Isaiah shows us that Jesus, the Messiah, is not clothed in the trappings of human ego but is truly capable and able to rule the world with justice and mercy.

Our Gospel reading calls us to look for Jesus – “Blessed are the eyes that see what you see” – Jesus said this privately to His disciples. They had recognised that Jesus was the one that the prophets had been preparing God’s people to receive. But today, just as in the time of Jesus, many people do not see Jesus. All of us can journey for a lifetime with the Lord and still never fully grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ. But once our eyes have glimpsed just a hint of this incredible truth, we cannot unknow His desire to be known in our lives, and to experience the peace that only Christ brings to our lives. The call of the whole Church across the world is to be a place where people can glimpse this Jesus. God’s desire is that all people will be reconciled to Him.

The work of the Mothers Union is a wonderful outpouring of God’s love in the world seeking to bring His kingdom into being. Today we give thanks for the work of the Mothers Union and ask God’s blessing on their calling to end gender based violence and for relationships across the world to flourish as God intended. Until Jesus comes again we are living in the tension of a world in transition – we can taste of the kingdom of God when we hear of communities that are winning the battle against oppression – yet we know there is still much more to be done.

And so let’s join together with the whole Church across the world in building God’s Kingdom and declaring the hope to be found in Jesus, who is the only true hope for the world.

I end with a great prayer from St Paul for us and especially all those who have suffered, or are still suffering, from any sort of abuse or violence in their life. (Ephesians 3:16-19)

¹⁶ I pray that out of His (Christ’s) glorious riches He may strengthen you with power through His Spirit in your inner being, ¹⁷ so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith. And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, ¹⁸ may have power, together with all the Lord’s holy people, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, ¹⁹ and to know this love that surpasses knowledge—that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God.

Amen.