

Due to the nature of my working life, people often share their experiences of church and church life with me. One common theme that is often raised with me is the misuse of the power and authority that preachers and church leaders sometimes appear to demonstrate in what they say, because their own opinions and views are given in the same context as words of liturgy. Many times, blame has been placed on victims of assault or attack, their pain has been ignored or minimized, and swift 'spiritual' solutions have been offered to make the 'problem' go away.

Congregations may listen to the words of a preacher and accept them more readily than if they were told similar anecdotes or stories in other contexts such as home, work or when chatting with friends. Therefore it is of paramount importance for all preachers to weigh and consider carefully what they will say from the elevated position of a pulpit.

This was brought home to me recently because of a particular talk that one church leader gave to children, which was shared with me.

The children (mostly primary school age) generally appeared uninterested during the sermon itself, but enjoyed colouring in some worksheets instead. The subsequent children's talk (tacked on to the end of the sermon) was probably an attempt to engage them, but the contents was arguably very disturbing.

The talk began when, at the end of the sermon, the preacher asked if there was time to tell the children a story, which there was. So the preacher said that there was a true story to tell the children, and that they should listen to it. Some of their parents encouraged them to listen rather than draw (although regretted that afterwards).

The story began about a female student who was in halls of residence at University. Some of the words used were terms that such young children would be unfamiliar with, so the preacher was perhaps unused to communicating with children. The content seemed to confirm that: They were told that the student had been told many times not to walk alone, not to walk alone at night, and not to walk in the woods alone. They were then told that the student had stupidly done all of those - walked alone, at night, in the woods - and became afraid when she saw a man there.

Of course, she was not stupid. A woman should be able to go anywhere at any time. Everyone should take sensible precautions, but the issue here is that not once throughout the story did the preacher speak of how the attacker - as he was - was wrong to go there, that he was the one wrong because he chose to attack. ***The only blame and criticism in the story was towards the woman.*** That was wrong.

All victims are attacked because a perpetrator makes that choice, to attack. It is never the fault of the victim. His actions should have been condemned, not hers. It is really astonishing that the person suffering the attack should be criticized, and not the attacker, whose behavior was not condemned at all in any stage of the "children's talk".

The story then went on about how she prayed, the man went away, and she got home safely. The next morning she heard how another woman had been attacked in that place, just after she had reached safety. The attacker, once caught, said that he had not attacked the 'praying' woman as he had seen two big shining men either side of her.

I have to question the validity of a 'true' story which is told in such a way that God seems to direct the attacker away from one woman and onto another? Did the other woman not pray? Virtually all victims - including atheists and agnostics - pray for rescue, if only by default. Victims by definition

were not protected or saved from attack by God. And what of the victim? If she hears that God directed the attacker from another woman to herself? Is she not as valuable as the first woman? If God was able to shield one, why not another? Why send him on to attack someone else instead of sending him away? What sort of angels were they (as this is how the preacher described them) for them to 'exchange' one woman victim for another?!

For any survivors of any form of attack or abuse who were listening (whether child or adult), how would they feel about the God who answered this woman's prayer and not theirs? The church, as with any group of people, statistically contains people whom God did not protect from their attackers.

For others who are not survivors, how would they now treat survivors, having been told that praying will make an attacker go away (and choose another victim instead!). Perhaps they will view victims as having not reached out to God in their time of need, or else not 'holy' or 'worthy' enough of saving?

Will they also query how the victim 'put themselves at risk' and blame the victim rather than the attacker? Whatever personal safety choices a potential victim makes, it is the attacker's choice to perpetrate the crime which results in the crime, it is the perpetrator's fault and *never* the victim's. The Church needs always to make it absolutely clear throughout its teachings that victims are blameless and need not repent or feel guilty.

Furthermore, the preacher went on to say that the victim (described as molested) was not 'hurt' - which of course was totally wrong. Perhaps she was not physically damaged - but 'hurt' - YES - absolutely. Why should her pain be dismissed so readily? Such a clear dismissal would do nothing to help any victims listening to seek help for their hurt having heard this victim's pain denied.

It also was wrong to tell children a 'true story about a molestation' as a talk aimed at them during a service. That the preacher considered (apparently on the spur of the moment) to tell what was described as a true story (but without evidence or reference or source given) to children about a molestation is dreadful. To blame the victim and not the attacker is inexcusable. To tell of a God who answers prayer by exchanging one victim for another is abhorrent. To dismiss hurt is naive and insulting to survivors. .

From my own work, the place that I have heard the most blame attached to victims is the church. I **have heard more reports of condemnation from within the church than anywhere else. Children** (and adults!) accept what a preacher says. Words are spoken of the creed, words of faith, and then combined with words of great damage and hurt.

In this instance, in my opinion, both God and victims - as well as angels - were misrepresented to children. Perhaps when reading this, you have had a picture in your mind of the preacher who gave this talk. Would it surprise you to know that it was a woman? Clearly there is much work yet to be done in both secular and religious circles to educate all types of people about attitudes towards abuse, perpetrators and victims / survivors.

By Rose Daniels