Safeguarding Sunday – "Love Protects" (1 Cor. 13:4-8a, 13; 1 John 3:16-18; Matthew 18:1-6)

May I speak in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

There are few words in Scripture more familiar to us than Paul's words in 1 Corinthians 13: "Love is patient; love is kind ... it bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things."

We often hear these words at weddings, where they speak of the love that sustains a marriage. But today, on Safeguarding Sunday, we are invited to hear them in a wider sense. These words speak not only about love between two people, but about the kind of love that can shape the whole Christian Church.

The theme for this year's Safeguarding Sunday is "Love Protects." Love protects – it's a simple phrase, but it carries a profound message. Christian love is not just something we feel or something we speak about. It is something we demonstrate through our actions, our relationships and the way we care for one another.

John, in his first epistle, writes, "Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action." These words speak directly to the heart of safeguarding. While it is quite easy to talk about love, kindness and compassion, it is much more challenging to put these words into practice, particularly if doing so requires courage, honesty or difficult decisions. But John reminds us that genuine love must be visible, tangible in what we do.

For the Church, this means that we cannot simply say that everyone is welcome. We must also make sure that everyone is safe, respected and valued.

Safeguarding is much more than policies and procedures, even though they are vital. At its core, safeguarding is an expression of our Christian responsibility to love our neighbour.

When we listen to someone who is struggling, when we take a concern seriously, when we challenge behaviour that causes harm or when we protect someone who is vulnerable, we are putting our faith into action. We are showing that people matter.

In today's passage from Matthew's gospel, the disciples come to Jesus asking who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. Perhaps they are thinking about importance, influence, status or power. But Jesus responds to them in a surprising way. He calls a little child and places that child in the midst of the disciples.

Jesus tells them that unless they change and become like children, they will not enter the kingdom of heaven. Jesus turns upside down his disciples' understanding of greatness. In God's kingdom, greatness is not about power or position, but humility and openness, and dependence upon God.

Jesus then gives a serious warning about causing harm to one of these little ones. His words remind us that children are precious to God. They are not to be overlooked, ignored or treated as less important. Their safety and wellbeing are paramount. And this concern extends beyond children to all those who may be vulnerable, isolated or unable to protect themselves. Jesus calls his followers to recognise the worth of every person, particularly those whose voices are easily overlooked.

For the Church today, this means that welcoming people is insufficient. We must also create and strengthen communities where people can participate without fear, where their concerns are heard and where their dignity is protected.

Returning to Paul's words in 1 Corinthians 13, we hear that love is patient and kind. It does not insist on its own way, and it rejoices in the truth. These qualities are essential to a healthy church community.

Patience means being prepared to listen, especially when someone finds it difficult to speak about a painful experience. Kindness means treating everyone with dignity and respect, regardless of their age, background or circumstances.

And rejoicing in the truth means having the courage not to ignore wrongdoing or turn away from difficult situations.

Sometimes we may be tempted to avoid difficult conversations because we do not want to upset people or disturb the peace of the church. But genuine love cannot remain silent when someone is being harmed. Protecting a person's reputation or an institution's standing and image must never take priority over the safety of someone who may be vulnerable.

Sometimes the most loving thing we can do is to listen carefully, speak up and take appropriate action. That is the meaning of "love protects."

Safeguarding is not simply the responsibility of the clergy, the safeguarding team or those who work with children and young people. It belongs to the whole Christian community, as we all have a part to play in creating a culture of trust, openness and care.

It means noticing those who may be isolated or on the periphery, listening when someone raises a concern, respecting appropriate boundaries, and making sure that everyone knows where to turn for help.

Safeguarding is not about creating suspicion or fear. It is about creating a community in which people can flourish because they know they are safe. We may not always get everything right, but we can commit ourselves to learning, growing and becoming more attentive to one another's needs.

At the end of 1 Corinthians 13, Paul reminds us that faith, hope and love abide, and that the greatest of these is love. We see this love most clearly in Jesus Christ, who did not simply speak about love, but lived it. And he calls us to do the same.

Safeguarding is not separate from our faith. It's not a postscript, not an addendum. Safeguarding is one of the ways in which our faith becomes real, visible, tangible.

May <u>our</u> church be a place where children and teenagers are safe, nourished and cherished, vulnerable adults are respected, those who have experienced hurt are heard, and everyone is treated with dignity and compassion.

May we be a community where God's love is not simply spoken about, but experienced in the way we care for one another. For love is more than words. Love listens, love cares, love speaks up, love acts and, above all, love protects.

Amen.