

Archbishop Stephen's sermon honouring and remembering all victims of domestic abuse, marking White Ribbon Sunday, at Hexham Abbey and Durham Cathedral. To read the text in full:

In many ways speaking to you about male violence against women as a man feels deeply uncomfortable.

It is uncomfortable because so much violence is perpetrated by men, and I am a man.

The statistics are shocking and appalling.

Of the 87,000 women who are murdered each year across the world, over half are killed by their partner or another family member. That is about 137 women every day. Tragically, this remains the most common cause of violence. And, fewer than 40% of women seek help for the violence they experience. Often, this will simply be because no help is available. Or because the help that is available is unsympathetic, unbelieving, and often also male. Tragically, in many circumstances, violence against women in relationships and marriages is, perversely, seen as acceptable or inevitable. Sometimes it is even legitimised by religious and other cultural traditions.

The Bible, for instance, contains many stories of violence against women. Sometimes it is explicit as in the terrible, terrible story of the woman towards the end of the book of Judges who is thrown out into the street, gang raped, killed and mutilated (see Judges 19. 22-30).

In the book of Numbers jealous husbands are provided with the means of testing their wives' faithfulness by drinking poisoned water (see Numbers 5. 11-31)

Even Esther is forced into the King's harem, treated like property.

Sometimes it is more subtle, such as in Hosea where Israel's unfaithfulness to God is described as being like a sexually promiscuous wife and must, therefore, be punished in the same way.

In many ways, this is the most problematic text of all, because as we read it we are invited and expected to be sympathetic with the way the unfaithful wife is treated, and the violence meted upon them.

There are other such passages. The effect of these can be to both condone and even promote the idea that male violence against women is acceptable.

But it is not.

In recent years feminist critique of these texts has enabled us to see how they inevitably reflect the cultural conditions of patriarchal societies where violence against women was, sadly and tragically, the norm. And just as tragically, that norm continues to this day: in this country and across the world. And, yes, I speak to you as a man, because the whole point of wearing a white ribbon is so that men draw attention to men's violence.

It is men who need to change. It is men who need to repent. It is men who need to lead the way.

It is not that women are not also capable of violence. They are. But today we focus on the despicable and pernicious ways in which male violence against women continues to cause such misery and brokenness across our world. And, therefore, we men need to look to ourselves to change and find within our traditions other models for living and behaving.

And, of course, we don't need to look far. Jesus models for us a very different attitude to women. The way he treated women and responded to them was radically different to the prevailing culture of his day and deeply shocking to many who encountered him.

It is likely that many women travelled with him in the wider band of his disciples.

Martha and Mary were his friends and he was a welcome guest in their house.

When he was thirsty, he asked a Samaritan woman for a drink. We can't realise how scandalous this was. Not only was he approaching a woman in a way that was unacceptable in his time, it was a Samaritan woman, whose religious beliefs were anathema to the Jews. In this way, Jesus crossed boundaries and broke, and challenged those cultural and religious traditions that not only excluded women, but also enabled them to be treated as property and dealt with in the same negligent and wilfully violent way.

Then, we have this beautiful story of Jesus honouring and receiving the kindness of the woman who anoints him, shaming the men who had welcomed him in by her profound care born. I suppose, of her thankfulness to him and her recognition of what she saw in him, nothing less than a different way of being human – a different way of being a man (see Mark 14. 3-9).

In our society today, the sexualisation of children and the objectification of women and the many ways in which women continue to be treated as property breed and legitimise violence.

In the name of Christ, we cry out for an end to this and speak up for a new set of attitudes, those that are given us in Christ. We men need to be liberated from the conditioning, the dis-ease and the insecurities that ferment into violence. Christ shows us the way.

Years ago, I remember someone asking me what difference being a Christian had made to my life. I remember saying it had enabled me to get in touch with things about myself as man that were so often denied or belittled in our culture. Like kissing my father in public. Like showing emotion. Like weeping. That these things were also male. And, I didn't need to prove my manhood by macho posturing and by suppressing emotion. Or by lashing out at someone.

This is the way of Christ: who weeps at the grave of his friend Lazarus; who receives the kindness of the women who loved him and served him; who stands up to the mob of men who would stone a woman to death for her failures; who sleeps in the boat when the storms rage around him; who can even quell the storms of anger and violence that could engulf me and could destroy others.

I wear a white ribbon today, because men need to change and because in Christ I see what that change could be.

St Paul famously challenges us saying that in Christ there is no man and woman. This doesn't mean that all differences between us are eliminated or insignificant, but it does mean that no one way of being human is superior to another and that in Christ there is this new humanity.

It is in the light of that new humanity and in the hope of liberation from all that defiles and corrupts us that we now need to find new ways of living, penitent for the mistakes of the past, crying out for justice in the present, and looking in the future for ways of equality, nonviolence and peace.

Stephen Cottrell

Archbishop of York

A number of locations in the North East will be hosting ['White Ribbon Sunday' services this November](#) honouring and remembering all victims of domestic abuse.

[Hexham Abbey](#) - 7th November, 10am White Ribbon Sunday Holy Communion - Archbishop of York Stephen Cottrell and Frank Mullane MBE

Durham Cathedral - 7th November , 3.30pm, White Ribbon Sunday Evensong - Archbishop of York Stephen Cottrell, Bishop of Durham Paul Butler, Frank Mullane MBE and Dr. Stephen Burrell (Durham University).

St. Andrew's Church, Newcastle upon Tyne , 21st November , White Ribbon Sunday Holy Communion, 10am - Councillor Jacqui Robinson (DV Survivor) and Kim McGuinness, Northumbria Police and Crime Commissioner.

Sunderland Minster, 21st November, White Ribbon Sunday Evensong, 3.30pm. Bishop of Durham Paul Butler, Kim McGuinness, Northumbria Police and Crime Commissioner St. Nicholas Church, Cramlington, Northumberland.

Wednesday 25th November - White Ribbon Holy Communion at 10am, followed by all day event of training and education, closing with a quiet reflective time for private prayer and lighting of candles.

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