When Home is Hell: Facing the Truth about Domestic Violence

A sermon by Revd Dr Sam Wells

Readings: Judges 11.30-39a; Ephesians 5.21-30

The 2009 novel, also a 2011 film, *The Help*, is about three women who each, in their different ways, find a level of liberation.¹ The novel starts with Aibileen, an African-American maid in Jackson, Mississippi in 1962. She’s spent her life raising white children, 17 in all, even though she lives in a society where her own son Treelore died aged 24 because, though talented, as a black man the only job he could get was dangerous and the basic safety measures that would have prevented his death were not in place. Aibileen’s power is expressed in her prayers, which she writes down, and whose effectiveness acquires an aura in her local congregation. Then there’s Miss Skeeter, a young college graduate who’s suffocating under the social expectations of her overbearing mother and her Junior League childhood friends. Bereft of the companionship of her childhood maid Constantine, Skeeter sets about recording, with Aibileen’s help, the experiences of a network of maids in Jackson, and in the process discovers how deep the evils of segregation reach. Finally there’s Minny. Minny is a maid who’s strong, energetic, and a superb cook. She’s inhibited in her professional prospects by her sharp tongue. She has five children, and it’s a mystery why she has so many children, until we realise the terrible truth: only when she’s pregnant does her husband desist from beating her.

The title of the book, *The Help*, is ironic and multilayered. It refers to the vernacular term for the role of maids in a southern middle-class white household. It refers to the assistance Aibileen and Minny and others give Skeeter as her efforts to uncover what happened to her childhood maid Constantine turn into a full-scale book. It refers to the subsequent name of that book, *Help*. But perhaps most importantly it refers to the way writing the book liberates each of the three women. Aibileen realises it’s time to tell her employer what she really thinks of her, retire, and be the writer she and her son should always each have been. Skeeter gets a contract to move to New York and escape the suffocations of Jackson. And Minny, having finally found an employer who respects and values and is loyal to her, finally finds it in her to leave her husband.

The novel has been highly controversial, largely because not everyone believes it’s possible, appropriate, or helpful for a white author to write a first-person narrative about two oppressed black women, particularly one that includes so much humour and irony and plays with gender and racial stereotypes. But tonight I want to think about what liberation means for Minny.

When talking about domestic violence, there are perhaps four things that need to be said at the outset. The first is, this is a social evil of epidemic proportions. It affects 30% of women worldwide and 22% of women in high-income countries such as the UK.² It’s no respecter of class, race, or religious affiliation: it’s society’s best-kept and most-prevalent secret. The secret is not that it takes place: it frequently emerges in criminal proceedings and in television and film representations. But because such portrayals invariably focus on extreme cases of injury and egregious violence, they

enhance the assumption that violence against women is exceptional and that the perpetrators are monsters. The real secret is that domestic violence, in the form of ‘control, humiliation and degradation, sexualised abuse, the abdication of responsibility by the male abuser and the attribution of blame to the woman,’ is widespread and that the perpetrators are regular, recognisable, otherwise-respectable men.3

The second thing to say is, domestic violence is in many ways inextricable from a whole spider’s web of social norms, habits, structures and roles that demean and isolate women and make them vulnerable to violence. These include a range of activities that undermine women’s dignity, equality, respect and well-being – most obviously commercial sexual exploitation, trafficking, child abuse, and sexual assault, but in more general terms anything that inhibits women from exercising political, economic, personal and social agency. The fact that rape within marriage has only been a crime in the UK for the last 25 years epitomises the degree to which the problem lies in the social imagination.

The third thing to say is that Christianity has much too often been invoked to underwrite and legitimise the psychological, economic, social and physical domination of women by men. The role of women has been wrongly identified, in many places and for many centuries, as being largely to meet the needs and expectations of husbands, children and parents, and a misdirected spirituality has too often been fostered that has encouraged women to bear their sufferings without complaint and share their oppression with Israel in slavery or Christ in his passion. Part of the problem has been that women have been seen almost entirely as receivers of the Christian tradition, rather than its co-creators. For the ideology to change, the identity of the ideologues has to change.

And the fourth thing to say is that domestic violence comes with sometimes profound complexities and sometimes manifests malaises that aren’t restricted to the dynamics of gender and violence. An illustration of this comes near the end of The Help. Minny’s husband Leroy, picking up Minny’s anxiety about the publication of the book, knows something’s up with her. His liquor-breath lingers on her shoulder, and she silently thanks God for her latest pregnancy, because the baby is all that’s saving her from a beating. She’s terrified what will happen when Leroy finds out she’s in the book. She’s aware of the contrast between her formidable public persona and the timid mess she becomes when Leroy’s attacking her. ‘I’m afraid to hit back,’ she says. ‘I’m afraid he’ll leave me if I do. I know it makes no sense and I get so mad at myself for being so weak! How can I love a man who beats me raw?’ (413) This is part of the complexity of Minny’s situation. Despite all, she does love Leroy – or at least, trapped as she is, she believes she does. It makes her oppression all the crueller. She recalls an occasion when, cornered in the bedroom like a dog, she dared to ask why he hit her. He replied, ‘If I don’t hit you, Minny, who knows what you’d become?’ (413, italics original) At that moment her plight becomes a symbol for the absurdity and horror and tragedy of segregation as a whole. If African Americans were not subject to Jim Crow laws who knows what they’d become, indeed. The fact that the enactment of white oppression in public is carried out by an African-American man in private makes the symbolism more painful, yet more poignant.

The account in Judges 11 of the death of Jephthah’s daughter offers a bleak, gruesome, but nonetheless revealing place to begin a theological response to domestic violence. The issue is not whether Jephthah should keep his vow, or whether he truly loves his daughter, or whether it’s absurd to imagine her evading her death sentence. The issue is that in the world of Judges, women are so subjugated to men that even when a man makes a foolish and reckless vow that entails the death of his beloved daughter, the preservation of a man’s social standing and the dignity of his

3 The language here is quoted from The Church of Scotland Church and Society Council, Living a theology that counters violence against women (Revised edition May 2014) http://www.churchofscotland.org.uk/__data/assets/pdf_file/0017/20096/Living-a-theology.pdf
keeping his word and the saving of his face comes before any consideration that might bear on the well-being of a woman. The book of Judges is a litany of how things in Israel were wrong in the time before the kings. Here is an invitation to see how domestic violence is bound up with a host of misplaced loyalties and lack of humility and ensconced patterns of oppression, now as much as then.

The household codes of the New Testament such as that in Ephesians 5 may seem a strange source to cite in responding to domestic violence. The point is not to relish the love of Christ for the church and try to ignore the rest. Nor is it to seek exact complementarity and equality in the injunctions for wives to be subject to their husbands as the church is to Christ and husbands to love their wives as Christ gave himself up for the church. Nor is it to flinch at the language of subjection and try to extirpate it from the Bible, understandable as that desire may be. Nor is it to dismiss the household codes as scarcely-edited imports from the surrounding Hellenistic culture. The point is to realise that a significant reason why the church grew so quickly among women and slaves in the first century is that it offered an ethic that liberated them from the untrammeled domination of the master of the house, who in a conventional Roman villa could with impunity lay hands on, strike down, lie with, or take advantage of any member of the household at any time he chose. What may seem constraining and controlling to us was liberating to oppressed people at the time. The language of Ephesians is an invitation to imagine how the church today could be a haven of respect and sanctuary as it was in the time of the early Christians. It’s a request to consider how the church makes space for pain, silence, lament, solidarity, kindness, patience and understanding. It’s a call to assume that in every assembly of people gathered for worship, at least one in five of the women present will relate to language of violence, symbols of conflict, suggestions of contempt, pleas for mercy, and assumptions of male power primarily through the filter of their own painful past or present experience.

It pays to be wary of being too prescriptive of what the church response to domestic violence should be, because this is fundamentally a matter of empowering and validating the response of women, rather than suggesting a simplistic remedy. Nonetheless we may talk broadly of five steps in which the church may seek to walk in partnership with those seeking to assert their own agency in the face of domestic violence.

Step one is to identify it as an epidemic, to call it what it is, to recognise how widespread it is, to be active but not surprised when it emerges, to anticipate its presence in every congregation and community, to be wise as a serpent and never so naive as to think it couldn’t be happening here or in this household, to be alert to signals and mindful of language that exacerbates shame or validates oppression. This includes supporting those who take the route of involving the criminal justice structure, while recognising that taking a case through the courts isn’t always successful legally or therapeutically. When the legal process doesn’t result in a conviction, there may be a sense of being victimised again, this time by the system. It can be another humiliating trauma; reinforcing the idea that the woman is in the wrong and that it’s her fault. But perhaps most simply step one means saying explicitly and unequivocally that domestic violence is a sin. It’s not justifiable, understandable, or negligible – it’s wrong, sinful, and something that requires repentance.

Step two is to dismantle its credibility structure. Changing the pattern of acceptable humour, altering the habits of objectifying women, and calling out the assumption that violence is a legitimate form of response to unresolved tension are all part of this. But one thing that needs to be transformed is the almost universal assumption that domestic violence is a women’s issue. It’s a men’s issue. Take the analogy of drink-driving. A generation ago if you were sitting in a pub and had clearly had too many and picked up your keys to drive home, your friends would shrug their shoulders and hope you could hold your liquor. Any attempt to question such would be so undermining it could threaten the future of the friendship. Today, your friends wouldn’t let you leave the pub unless you let them take you home or ordered a taxi. And take the example of racism
in football. Thirty years ago monkey chants were quite common on terraces. Today every player is glad to step up and be a role model for kicking racism out of football. We need the same kind of revolution in relation to domestic violence. Public figures and celebrity idols need to be part of a movement that completely dismantles its credibility structure.

Step three is confess the church’s complicity in domestic violence, historically by endorsing the social habits and ideologies that legitimise it, theologically by seldom challenging the dominance of women by men, and pastorally by invariably asking women to grin and bear it rather than encouraging them to form networks of resistance and strategies of escape. This needs to be accompanied by the taking of active steps to make the church a place of sanctuary and support, a place where men have no right to control, chastise or beat women, a community where understanding can be anticipated, tenderness to name grief, mourn pain and share loss can be assumed, and companionship to articulate future hope can be expected. This includes using language that hears and sees women, and doesn’t ignore, obscure or belittle them.

Step four is to change the inward and outward perception of church from a community where people seek, justifiably or unjustifiably, to be normal, together, self-sufficient, impressive, uncomplicated, and sorted, to an assembly where people can bring their wounds, their struggles, their shame and their fear, and walk alongside others whose troubles are no doubt different but probably just as deep. Perhaps the worst thing a person can face in a situation of degradation and violence and abuse is isolation – the sense that no one else knows, no one understands, and probably no one cares. The church hasn’t got all the answers in the face of domestic violence and in some cases it’s part of the problem. But the least it must be is a community where people listen, have compassion, and care.

And step five is to pray for, work for, and actively seek conversion and lasting change. Perpetrators of violence are akin to addicts: they deny, evade, deceive, hide, connive – and repeat-offend countless times. However much they are called out, left by those they hurt, prosecuted, or isolated, the only person that can change their behaviour is themselves. There’s only one word to describe what the church finally seeks for them, and that’s conversion. It’s not enough on its own: it needs accountable community, the learning of new habits, the shedding of old ways, an act of will and determination and persistence and renewed commitment. Of course they need everything that the law and social condemnation and constraint and sometimes even ostracism can achieve. But the Christian word for change is conversion, and that’s what’s finally needed.

One of the defining, and repeated, scenes in *The Help* portrays the African-American maid Aibileen teaching her white employers’ three-year-old child the simple building-blocks of life. ‘You is kind. You is smart. You is important.’ More than once Aibileen has to repeat this counsel when Mae Mobley’s mother has countered it with demeaning or violent behaviour toward her. And this displays the irony of Aibileen embodying and propounding a gospel in the midst of employers who contradict its message at every opportunity. How does one sustain self-esteem, courage, and dignity when confronted by violence, contempt, and humiliation? That’s the challenge of living in the midst of and beyond domestic violence. Perhaps African Americans, and other oppressed people whose experience has been shaped by dignity informed in many cases by profound faith, are the best people to offer an answer.