

Easter 5, Acts 7, Jn 14, Christian Aid Week 10.30am Cathedral
In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Today starts the beginning of Christian Aid week and this morning I want to talk about the work of Christian Aid, and help us to work out what we can do, both individually and collectively for others. It seems to me all the more important at the moment since it is clear that since Brexit, some people have felt they have the licence to be openly xenophobic, and with an election looming, the temptation will be for politicians on all sides to appeal to self-interest in some way. This is not about that, but it is political.

We have a great track record in this country in recent year of putting the international target of 0.7% into aid for foreign countries, largely through the Department for International Development or DfID. It is clearly not enough and governments alone cannot do enough. We all need to play our part.

The work of Christian Aid has never been more important. This year they have three areas of focus to their work: refugees, climate justice and the emergency appeal for East Africa. I am going to say a little about each one, particularly to assist those going collecting on the streets. Collecting is a tough and thankless task. Some people can be quite rude but not all. Many people can and do want to give to a cause they trust and care about. So firstly, I want to thank all those who have collected in the past and who are collecting this year. It is a vital job and Christian Aid depends on church volunteers for this annual collection and 60% of the total that comes in in the week, comes in this way. As we are in the

midst of an election, it is important to make clear that collectors are not political canvassers and non party political. Last year 7 million envelopes were distributed this way.

When we think about refugees we often think of the 1.5-2m in the Middle East, but overall, there are actually 65m displaced globally, forced from their homes by violence, fear or desperation, each deserving of safety, freedom and hope. And it is our job to help them, to help these our neighbours.

It is always easier to understand what is happening when you hear a personal story from someone. This year, Christian Aid is highlight the plight of a couple called Nejebar and Noor. Nejebar fled Afghanistan with her family after the Taliban threatened to kill anyone who worked for the government, like her husband, Noor. The Taliban carried out that threat on another family member, taking out his eyes before killing him.

So Noor's family fled and ended up at a camp in Greece. When they arrived, they thought they would only stay for 10 days, but they've been there six months and there's no end in sight. Noor describes their initial reaction to arriving there: 'It was like suicide for us, but we took the decision that it is better to die here than to die there from war.' The only protection they have against the wind and rain is their tent. There's no school for their children. Sudai, their youngest child aged 5, is ill. His stomach is swollen and he hasn't been growing as he should, but Nejebar and Noor don't know what's wrong with him because they can't communicate with the camp's doctor.

Article 1 of the UN Declaration on Human Rights says this:

‘All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood.’

Article 3: ‘Everyone has the right to life, liberty and security of person.’

How is any of this going to happen unless we help people like Nejebar and Noor to set up a new life away from conflict and treat them with the dignity and compassion with which we would want to be treated ourselves?

Christian Aid is helping refugees in Greece and Serbia, and continuing to work in the Middle East to support displaced Syrians and Iraqis. They're also working in other conflict-affected countries including South Sudan and the Democratic Republic of Congo. They are doing things like providing hot meals, water and washing facilities, and cash to refugee communities living in freezing conditions. Thankfully, in the sites in which their partners work, refugees have been moved into heated buildings.

On Climate Change, the issue for Christian Aid is the impact of climate change on developing communities. Experts, those are people who know more than we do and are to be trusted, predict more floods, drought and extreme weather patterns to come. For those living in poverty, this means more hunger, conflict and insecurity, and a more uncertain future for us all. Many churches have switched to renewable energy and we are trying to play our part here by reducing our carbon footprint, and energy useage.

At the moment, money from government subsidies, investments of churches and pension funds, and our own bank accounts, supports the fossil fuel industry and continues to fuel climate change. The Big Shift campaign aims to help us move away from fossil fuels and into renewable energy so that we can build a cleaner, safer world. We need to:

1. phase out fossil fuels
2. adopt renewable energy
3. keep global temperature rise below two degrees from pre-industrial levels.

The third element I want to talk about is the emergency appeal for East Africa. Right now, 16m people across South Sudan, Ethiopia, Kenya and Somalia urgently need food. People are dying in the worst crisis not since LiveAid but since 1945.

Famine has been declared in parts of South Sudan, where 100,000 people face starvation and nearly 5 million people urgently need food. This follows more than three years of devastating conflict, which has left millions of people without a safe place to call home. The greatest sadness is that this was avoidable and man-made.

The situation is also grave in Somalia, Kenya and Ethiopia where 14 million people are going hungry every day, caught up in the region's worst drought in 50 years. In Somalia alone, over 360,000 children under five are extremely malnourished.

Never has the work of agencies like Christian Aid been more critical. This year we have the opportunity to show that

we do still care about others and to raise the greatest sum that has ever been raised. It is certainly needed.

This morning we have heard about the stoning of Stephen the first Christian martyr by a mob of religious zealots, and then we had that gospel reading where Jesus says some surprising things, like there being many dwelling places, many rooms in his Father's house, that he is the way to God, the truth and the life, and that if we ask for anything in his name, he will do it.

You have to wonder what that last bit means. It seems to me that what we have translated that into, is asking for whatever we want or think is right, and then adding at the end of the prayer, almost robotically, the words: 'in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.' And assumed that that is good enough.

Well today at the beginning of Christian Aid week, I am saying to you it is not only not enough, it is to miss the point completely.

To ask or do something in someone else's name is to play the role of messenger or ambassador. More to the point, though, what I wonder is the prayer of Nejebar and Noor, or those with them in refugee camps, or those starving through conflict or climate change. It doesn't matter what religion they are, they will still cry out to God for help.

But how is that help going to come? If we pray for their situation in the name of Christ and are not ourselves part of the answer, of finding the answer, and helping, then we are surely missing something rather fundamental to what it

means to be Christian. To be Christian is to be like Christ, and that means we have to do all in our power to love and serve our neighbour.

'Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?' And the king will answer them, 'Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.'

Amen.