

Living stones or stumbling blocks?

A sermon preached by Paul Valentin, International Director of Christian Aid on Sunday 14 May 2017 at St Peter's Church for Christian Aid Week.

Ref: Acts 7.55-60; Psalm 31.1-5,15-16; 1 Peter 2.2-10; John 14.1-14

O Holy Spirit of love, quicken our imaginations that we may feel more deeply for the needs of others as we put ourselves in their place. Give us hearts of self-forgetting compassion which will move us to give from that which you have given us, and to be good neighbours to those both near and far, for the sake of him who taught us that it is more blessed to give than receive, Jesus our Lord. Amen.

A very good morning! It's been a few years since I last spoke here at St Peter's and had the chance to address the congregation which I consider a privilege to be part of. The reason I'm here now is Christian Aid Week. Christian Aid is now 71 years old but this year is the Diamond Jubilee of Christian Aid Week. The prayer I just recited was a Christian Aid Week prayer of 1958.

For 60 years Christians, in a massive act of public witness, have reached out to the general public with the message that our following Jesus inspires us to go beyond the pews, that we care about our neighbours in need, wherever they may be.

When, about a month ago, I realised I hadn't been booked for any preaching assignment on Christian Aid Week's Sunday, I seized the opportunity to ask Charles if I could speak here and I am truly grateful for this opportunity.

But perhaps that was the easy bit. When I saw the readings for this Sunday, I realised I faced a challenge. The readings, and the psalm, all touch on core elements of the Christian faith but how does one as a non-theologian, a development worker in fact and agriculturist by training, shed a fresh light on these passages with Christian Aid Week in mind?

The theme of stones could certainly be explored. In today's reading from the Acts of the Apostles, Stephen is stoned to death for professing Christ's divine nature. In Peter's first letter to small communities of persecuted Christians, in what is now Turkey, he exhorts them to be living stones. The choice is theirs - to be stones as stumbling blocks, or stones as part of a holy architecture, a spiritual house.

I did develop some ideas about this theme but also decided not to pursue it because a closer reading of John's gospel may ultimately provide a better way in.

John's words describe Thomas and Philip, who are almost demanding a roadmap or a satnav to make sure they arrive at their view of a divine destination, and Jesus' response, "*just follow me*"! They ask how they will get to the Father to which Jesus replies that God's post code and mine are the same, I am in the Father and the Father is in me. For sure that response must have been confusing for the disciples who did not yet have the benefit of 2000 years of theological reflection and analysis.

On first reading, I was unsure what to make of it. I could just quote Jesus' wonderful words, "*I am the way, the truth and the life*" and leave it that, believe it or not, case closed.

Remembering some wise advice that Mark Butchers once gave this congregation on how to read and understand bible stories, I took a closer look at where in John's gospel this chapter sits. What came before? What is the context? And indeed, reading what came earlier sheds much light, and it makes even more sense when we read what follows. Jesus had just begun to prepare his disciples for his imminent persecution and death. But there is this massive contradiction with what the disciples have witnessed, Jesus seemingly at the height of success, making a triumphant entry into Jerusalem. Power seemed to be within reach.

But the promise to his disciples is not one of a first-class ticket from here onwards, it is not about reaping a rich harvest in the here and now. Virtually everything he says and does in the preceding chapters is about expected suffering and death, and about conveying the survival kit or roadmap to those remaining to carry on the mission.

And the message is still a clear one. If you want to fulfil your purpose in life, if you want to come closer to God, follow Christ for he is the way, the truth and the life. A place will be prepared for you. Don't worry! Those who believe in me will do what I do. Yes, they will do even greater things.

It is not a promise of an easy ride as Stephen experienced when he testified to this holy purpose and paid the ultimate price as the first Christian martyr. And what does it mean to follow Christ? Ask Stephen, ask the apostles, ask the saints, ask ordinary people who, inspired by faith, have done extraordinary things.

Following Christ in every age has had its own challenges. The gospel was written almost two millennia ago and while, at the core, many of the issues remain the same, it is up to every generation to interpret what it means to follow Christ in their time, in their context, in our time, in our context. It is therefore active, not passive. We have a compass, not a satnav!

When Jesus says, "*do what I do*", then what do we know? What can we be sure of?

Jesus was there for people in need. He healed the sick, dined with the outcasts, he did not respect many of the societal boundaries prescribed by the strict rules of what it meant to be a 'good' Jew. He mingled with unclean people, even drinking from their cups. He treated non-Jews, women and children as equals. He was prepared to take sides and speak truth to power. He won't have been easy company, more the awkward dinner guest who happens to say things that make everyone, including the host, feel uncomfortable. In first century Palestine, he was someone who knew what oppression felt and looked like but didn't settle for easy answers. A rebel, yes, but not in the mould that people could easily place or identify with. Not a populist with some easy scapegoats and quick fixes but a troublemaker who reminded people of the eternal truth.

In my humble opinion this would mean that the church following in Jesus' footsteps today ought to fall firmly in the awkward squad category and perhaps, thankfully, in some ways it is. But let's not dwell on that now.

When the British and Irish churches asked themselves what it meant to follow Jesus in the messy aftermath of World War Two, they concluded that their followership would take them into former enemy territory and therefore decided to reach out to refugees, hungry

and displaced people in Germany and central Europe. Their choice wasn't immediately popular on the home front, but it came out of a discernment that discipleship of Jesus would take them down that track. Christian Reconstruction in Europe was thus founded 71 years ago. It was later renamed Christian Aid, particularly when, 60 years ago, Christian Aid Week was launched as an annual manifestation of Christian witness and of solidarity with people in need.

The plight of refugees is frequently the focus of our work - Central European refugees after WW2, refugees to Western Europe after the fall of the Iron curtain, Palestinian refugees after the state of Israel was declared, Korean refugees during the Korean war, and most recently refugees from Syria, Iraq, South Sudan, Afghanistan and other places where war, insecurity and grinding poverty leave people with no options but to flee.

Christian Aid still works on behalf of 31 Christian denominations across Britain and Ireland, including the Church of England, the Methodist Church, the URC and the Baptist Union, the Quakers, the Church of Scotland and the Union of Welsh Independents (and everything in between). An expression of Christian solidarity with the world's poor and disempowered but also an expression of a desire to do this on principles that unite all Christians, regardless of differences in doctrine, tradition or affiliation.

We are clear that we are not acting on a self-given mandate but we are the churches agency - we are your agency. When today we are working with people affected by conflict in Borno state in northern Nigeria, *we see ourselves as stretching your hands to touch those who suffer there*. They are your symbolic five loaves and two fishes gathered in Christian Aid Week multiplied by the World Food Programme feeding 200,000 people. It is your support and prayers that sustain our staff and our partners trying to replace an economy of war by an economy of peace across remote rural areas and urban slums in Colombia and so on. There are many examples.

We need to continuously ask ourselves what it means to follow Jesus in this day and age and that has brought us to working on climate change, both at a practical level with communities affected by it and at a policy level by trying to influence consumer behaviour and policies, governments and business. It has made us ask questions about international finance flows, about fair trade and fair taxation.

We won't claim a monopoly on any of this. Many other agencies and individuals are pursuing similar causes, on humanitarian or health concerns, for oppressed and forgotten people, for the environment and the rights of all creatures. Motives vary and many are secular but discipleship can take many forms and there is no hierarchy of importance.

But this week we are here to witness that the churches in Britain and Ireland continue to stand in solidarity with our fellow human beings, often in distant places who deserve more, whose humanity has been challenged or violated.

The theme of this year's Christian Aid Week is the plight of refugees. We were there in 1945, let's be there again today. It is a huge issue.

As we speak, Christian Aid partners in Myanmar, Afghanistan, South Sudan, Kenya, the Congo, Syria, Lebanon, Iraq, Greece, Serbia and other places are responding to the needs of people who have had to flee their homes. They no longer have a safe place to call home. Worldwide there are at least 65 million people who are refugees. 65 million women, men and children, all created in God's image, all with inherent dignity and worth, all people just like you and me whose cries are eerily like those the psalmist wrote thousands of year ago:

"My times are in your hand; deliver me from the hand of my enemies, and from those who persecute me. Make your face to shine upon your servant, and save me for your mercy's sake."

And as the reading from the first letter of Peter points out, we have a choice. We can be living stones or stumbling blocks. We can turn our backs and tell the world we don't care, *"let them eat stones"*. We can be like the crowd at Stephen's stoning, covering our ears because the message is unwelcome. Or we can choose to pray, act and give.

Thank you for the gifts, the actions and the prayers. Thank you for your support over the past decades. Thank you collectors for going out into the wider community to bear witness to the good news.

Let us pray:

Almighty God, who by the Word become flesh, gave inherent dignity to all of humanity, by your grace, may we recognise your presence and the incredible privilege of encountering your image in each other.

And grant that by your inspiration we may work continually to challenge anything that dehumanises another and to amplify the worth and value of all through Jesus Christ our risen Lord. Amen.