

## **Christian Aid Week**

**A sermon preached at St Peter's Wolvercote by Paul Valentin,  
International Director of Christian Aid on Sunday 13<sup>th</sup> May 2007**

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*The readings used at the service were these:*

### **First Reading: Isaiah 58.1-12**

*Thus says the Lord: <sup>1</sup>Shout out, do not hold back! Lift up your voice like a trumpet! Announce to my people their rebellion, to the house of Jacob their sins. <sup>2</sup>Yet day after day they seek me and delight to know my ways, as if they were a nation that practised righteousness and did not forsake the ordinance of their God; they ask of me righteous judgements, they delight to draw near to God. <sup>3</sup>'Why do we fast, but you do not see? Why humble ourselves, but you do not notice?' Look, you serve your own interest on your fast-day, and oppress all your workers. <sup>4</sup>Look, you fast only to quarrel and to fight and to strike with a wicked fist. Such fasting as you do today will not make your voice heard on high. <sup>5</sup>Is such the fast that I choose, a day to humble oneself? Is it to bow down the head like a bulrush, and to lie in sackcloth and ashes? Will you all this a fast, a day acceptable to the LORD? <sup>6</sup>Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? <sup>7</sup>Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover them, and not to hide yourself from your own kin? <sup>8</sup>Then your light shall break forth like the dawn, and your healing shall spring up quickly; your vindicator shall go before you, the glory of the LORD shall be your rearguard. <sup>9</sup>Then you shall call, and the LORD will answer; you shall cry for help, and he will say, Here I am. If you remove the yoke from among you, the pointing of the finger, the speaking of evil, <sup>10</sup>if you offer your food to the hungry and satisfy the needs of the afflicted, then your light shall rise in the darkness and your gloom be like the noonday. <sup>11</sup>The LORD will guide you continually, and satisfy your needs in parched places, and make your bones strong; and you shall be like a watered garden, like a spring of water, whose waters never fail. <sup>12</sup>Your ancient ruins shall be rebuilt; you shall raise up the foundations of many generations; you shall be called the repairer of the breach, the restorer of streets to live in.*

### **Gospel reading: John 12.20-26**

<sup>20</sup>Among those who went up to worship at the festival were some Greeks. <sup>21</sup>They came to Philip, who was from Bethsaida in Galilee, and said to him, 'Sir, we wish to see Jesus.' <sup>22</sup>Philip went and told Andrew; then Andrew and Philip went and told Jesus. <sup>23</sup>Jesus answered them, 'The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. <sup>24</sup>Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. <sup>25</sup>Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life. <sup>26</sup>Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, there will my servant be also. Whoever serves me, the Father will honour.

## Paul's sermon

*"Look, you serve your own interest on your fast-day, and oppress all your workers" "Is this not the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice..."*

A man of my heart: speaking truth to power; saying it as it is, no mincing of words. This revered prophet must have been a bit of a rebel rouser in his days. Whenever I hear this reading from the prophet Isaiah I hope and believe that many messages that Christian Aid puts out resonate with the voice of this old testament prophet; "Trade Justice; not Free Trade", (and I could think of quite a few others...)

But as a representative of the agency with the strap-line "we believe in life before death" - and not being a theologian myself - I was a bit puzzled with the second choice of bible reading, which, as I was informed by Mark, actually came as recommended reading from the Christian Aid Week Order of Service; *"Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life"*.

The text bothers me. But let me park my question right here; I promise to come back to it but let me first talk a bit about the kind of work that Christian Aid supports around the world.

When a ravaging drought affected East Africa early last year, Christian Aid rung the alarm bells and together with local organisations, Christian and Muslim alike, we organised a response for some of the most affected people. In the northern desert areas of Kenya and in the south of Ethiopia - with the help of our supporters- we provided funds to local groups to bring in tankers of water to keep people and livestock alive while food aid and more structural responses were being organised.

We provided support to vulnerable families in Kenya; particularly families affected by or living with Aids, single-parent families, etc. And in the East of Kenya we worked with drought-prone communities on preparing for the collection of as much of the rainfall as possible for once it would finally fall.

In February this year I had the privilege of visiting Kenya and in particular some of the villages that had received support during the most difficult period. I am happy to report back to you what I saw and what I heard from the people on the other side of this 'chain of compassion': with your financial support they build a dam in a small stream; when the rains finally came, the reservoir behind the dam had filled with water; they fenced it off so animals could not contaminate the water and to protect the soil around the reservoir. Now the local community can collect drinkable water at a little kiosk below the dam. They charge a minimal fee so that they can pay a caretaker to look after the dam, the fence and the water kiosk. The villagers were very proud to show me this. The local Christian Aid partner - set up by Anglican diocese - had provided the technical assistance and Christian Aid funds had paid for moving the considerable amount of soil, the pipes and the fencing.

Nearby, in a normally dry riverbed, they had built so-called sub-surface dams; concrete dams, about ten feet high in the riverbed that fill with sand after heavy rain but which also retain substantial quantities of water, this can then be drawn using a small pipe at the bottom of the dams. There were three dams in close succession; the technology was startlingly simple and there now is a new reliable water source for most of the year. The set up was the same: technical support from the local CA partner and Christian Aid funding for cement and pipes; while local people provided all the labour.

The last project they showed me was perhaps the most impressive: a number of households were quite far from these low-lying water collection points but the government had promised the villagers that if they could get the pipes and the work done, they would be allowed to connect to a large concrete water reservoir in a nearby village operated by the government. The water was piped in over a distance of more than a hundred miles but it just lacked bridging the remaining 2 ½ miles or so. And now comes the wonderful story: the local village committee with its 180 members took charge. In three days time they had dug a trench 2 to 3 feet deep and over 2 ½ miles in length. Imagine the Oxford City Council informing the Wolvercote Commoners Committee that the village could get water for as long as local villagers would dig a trench all along St Giles, down the Woodstock Road and along First Turn to - let's say - a central standpipe in front of the school. How long would it take us if all we had were some spades and shovels and a few hoes? And they did it in three days!

What makes it even more impressive: looking around me at the village meeting I saw mainly elderly people and young children; I was told that most of the younger generation work in Nairobi, which is about a 100 miles away; they only come home a few times a year so the realisation dawned on me that the work had been done primarily by people of over the age of 40 (which in Kenya is "much older" than it is here!) and most of them were women. I asked them how they had managed because clearly some of the membership looked rather frail to me. They had no problem explaining: The able-bodied ones could work in shifts because they didn't have enough tools to all work at the same time. the ones who could not dig, could help look after the children or could provide water and tea. And for the really frail ones; they could just be there to provide moral support; to sing and to pray and to help keep spirits up. Imagine 3 days! If something like that were to happen here it would make front page news in the Oxford Times and BBC Thames Valley would send in a TV crew!

Oh, and what was the Christian Aid contribution? We paid for the PVC pipes that were put in the trench. I felt very humble; there was no way that we could refer to that project as 'our project'; we were the ones privileged to be part of 'their project'.

And it is for projects and communities like the one I described that we go out again this week to collect for Christian Aid week. To our collectors I can only say: we are immensely grateful for what you do for the cause. If the going is

rough because of rain or wind or because of an unfriendly reception at the doorstep; please keep the image of those villagers in mind!

But the story does not end there; if combating poverty around the world was only a matter of supporting enthusiastic villagers, we would have probably succeeded by now .... and here we enter the terrain of discomfort.

What I did not tell you is that the water source for the government-built water tank comes from the slopes of Kilimanjaro and it is ultimately fed by the melting water of the glaciers on that mountain. Over the past decades, the glaciers have been retreating and forecasts are that in 30 to 40 years time they will be totally gone. What will happen to the people who depend on its life-sustaining water? We know with certainty that global warming is causing the fast melting of glaciers and we know with increasing certainty that this in turn is caused by the increase in greenhouse gases.

As with so many issues in the world: the people who are least responsible for causing the problem are the first to suffer and they will suffer disproportionately. Whether they are coastal dwellers in Bangladesh, hill farmers in Central America or marginalised black communities on the gulf Coast of Louisiana or Mississippi; it is the poor who suffer most from global warming for which we, here in the UK carry not a unique but still a heavy responsibility. Christian Aid is campaigning on climate change because for us this is a social justice issue. Years of working for development will be undermined if we don't make drastic changes in the way we run our economy and our lives in this country. We cannot work on poverty and not touch on the inconvenient truths.

Another truth - and not one shared to me by the local villagers but by a social worker from the church - was that at the height of the drought there was a considerable increase in the number of local young girls offering their bodies in the trade of sex for survival, primarily along the two motorways that cross this part of Kenya; the trucking routes to Uganda and Somalia. We know HIV is spreading within the community and ignorance is still very high, not least because some of the leaders - including some in the churches - continue to talk about HIV and Aids as a purely moral issue while we are dealing with the spread of a virus where knowledge can save lives and ignorance kills. With our partners we campaign on HIV and Aids; raising awareness, breaking the stigma and giving young people survival skills.

We campaign on climate change, we campaign on HIV and Aids and we continue to campaign on trade justice.

Why are there so few young adults in the villages in eastern Kenya? Traditionally the people were herders of livestock as well as farmers. Farming in the third world – as in most of the developed world – cannot produce enough income for families to survive. Population pressure is part of the problem as is poor governance and unfavourable soil conditions but in most places people could produce enough to eat and even have a little to sell in the market.

Under the guise of promoting free trade farmers are losing their markets, after they have already lost their marketing structures and whatever price protection they used to have. Farmers in Senegal cannot grow onions, tomatoes and rice because the government of that country has been forced by Worldbank conditions to liberalise its markets. So in Senegal today the onions come from Holland, the tomatoes from Italy and the rice from the United States while local farmers go bankrupt.

Christian Aid has been accused of being too political and not sticking to what it knows best but we have to be honest: poverty and injustice will not be overcome with charity alone; speaking truth to power and exposing the inconvenient truths have to be part of what we stand for.

And that brings me back to the bible readings; the voice of Isaiah rings loud and clear: *"Is this not the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice..."* Words as relevant today as when they were first uttered a few thousand years ago.

And how about the second reading from the book of St John?  
I promised to come back to it. In preparation for today I asked a colleague with a theological background about this; she did give a lengthy theological explanation, which I feel I could not do justice by repeating it in my words here but she also mentioned that on the day he was shot while saying mass, Bishop Romero of El Salvador had used that bit of text as the theme of his sermon

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A sentence before the one about "hating your life in this world" it says: *"Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit"*.

Do we all - like Bishop Romero - have to die as martyrs to make a difference? I don't think so but in this time of Easter we do remember Jesus' ultimate sacrifice for all of us. Many people carry his cross on a daily basis and some do make the ultimate sacrifice but for all of us, through baptism and through receiving communion we are invited to be part of 'bearing fruit'.

And what about "*hating one's life*"? Well, when we do pray, give and act, we are not only building God's kingdom on earth but also within ourselves. For the more we are turned towards the poorest in our world, the more we will realise the emptiness of greedy, selfish lifestyles and the more we will come to hate the spiritual damage such lifestyles inflict upon us. Praying, acting, giving is as potentially life-changing (life-saving?) for us as it is for the developing world. It is good news for all of us, especially, but not uniquely in Christian Aid week.

Amen