

## **Sermon for Sunday 8 May 2022 – Fourth Sunday of Easter**

### **Julian Bryant – Church Engagement and Fundraising Officer (Norfolk and Suffolk) for Christian Aid**

Some years ago, I was in the middle of the Amazonian rainforest, and I had somebody who was driving me along this very, very poor road, worse than the A11 on my journey this morning! And it was getting dark, and we could hear the sounds of the animals in the background. And then we got a flat tyre; and we looked around and we started to feel a bit scared. But of course, we had a spare tyre in the back of this Jeep. And so the person who was driving went to get the spare tyre, took it out, and there was a puncture in the spare tyre. And so we wondered what was going to happen to us. But somewhat amazingly, there was a house opposite behind a very high wall with barbed wire on it. And there were some words written in Spanish - I don't speak Spanish. And the driver said this when I suggested we go and seek help from this house - 'Well, it says on that sign, if you come into my property, I will shoot you dead.' And there are many people around our world that are facing dilemmas around poverty, that whatever they seem to do, it seems that the odds are stacked against them; sometimes in our own communities, but also so much more in communities around the world.

And in this passage, the gospel reading this morning, we read of Jesus being challenged to declare whether he was the Messiah that the people were expecting at this time of the Festival of Light, or the feast of Dedication. About 200 years earlier, the temple had been desecrated, I think it was by the Greeks; and pigs have been sacrificed in the temple and Zeus was worshipped until there was a rebellion. And so in the context of that festival the people were asking Jesus, 'Are you the Messiah?' And I think Jesus was saying, 'Perhaps not the Messiah that you are thinking of.' And a phrase sticks out for me in our gospel reading this morning - 'The works I do in my father's name testify about me. Look at what I do.' They testify about the Father, like Tabitha, people praised her and showed Peter the clothes that she made. They testified about God; and in many ways, Christian Aid, what we aim to do is to show people, to give people a tangible expression of the love of God, a physical expression of the love of God, in over 20 countries.

I'm going to speak briefly about two of the countries that we work in. First of all, Ukraine. I don't think you'll be able to see this, but it doesn't matter. You don't need me to tell you in many ways the situation of Ukraine. You will have seen it on your television. The most recent statistics are that over 5 million Ukrainians have had to leave the country and a quarter of the population is not at their home and are dispersed around them. There have been 6800 casualties so far, although the estimates wildly vary. But we do know that at least 3310 people have died, including children, and many more injured. And we expect these numbers to increase significantly because in times of war, it is incredibly hard to get accurate statistics. And, of course, each one of those statistics is a person with a name; they could be a child, a son, a daughter, a granddaughter, a grandparent. And this is being caused by artillery, by explosive shells mostly, which come and destroy and also destroy the infrastructure. Imagine the dust, coughing. Imagine the smell of the sewers that have been wrecked, no electricity, a high piercing in your ear, shaking with shell shock, the impossibility of getting aid and help to some people in that situation.

But in the midst of all this darkness and war, we still see the tangible expressions of the love of Jesus. I heard a Church leader this week talk about how they were providing food in a very dangerous situation, going in a rowing boat across the river into an area of conflict to distribute food to people. But also yourselves - over £300 million has been donated to the DEC Appeal, the Disasters Emergency Committee. And Christian Aid is spending over a million pounds on baby incubators because many hospitals have been destroyed. And we want to care for these fragile, fragile lives; but also providing food and water to refugees and also providing many trauma first aid kits for injuries that are not like our injuries. I have been trained in how to use these, and they are for severe, severe injuries that we hardly ever see in this country. But it's an expression, a tangible expression of the love of Jesus. So thank you if you have donated to that appeal, thank you so much, because that Church leader said that the care and compassion of the churches around the world is not only good because it provides physical things, but it means that they are not forgotten. They feel cared for by you.

Now, moving on to a different country, Zimbabwe. Zimbabwe is the country that we are focusing on in Christian Aid Week this year. In Zimbabwe, we are focusing particularly on women, because women are impacted more in terms of poverty than men, often. And seven out of ten women in Zimbabwe rely on smallholding type farms that they look after themselves. It's the second worst country in terms of drought that is in the world. And climate change is making a huge impact. People are hungry and often skip meals. I don't think you'll be able to see her, but this is Jessica. She's 36. She has two boys and four girls. She also takes care of her elderly father and brother, both of whom are chronically ill. She is hardworking, she is compassionate, and sadly, we have just heard, just in April, that her husband died. Now, when the crops fail, Jessica and her family rely on one bowl of porridge for the whole family, and so they have to eat one bowl of porridge between them each day. She said, 'My children crave a good meal I can't provide. We often go to bed on an empty stomach', but Jessica works really hard.

What we are doing through your donations, and what we want to increase is to train Jessica and her community and the communities around her in how to grow food in drought conditions, because it is possible to grow drought resistant seeds, but also to train Jessica in how to grow in these conditions. And also we develop, we help the community build underground water reservoirs that can store hundreds of litres of water for droughts. So when it does rain, it goes into the reservoir below and there are hundreds of thousands of litres stored; and we train the community how to manage those and keep them going for these times, because we want to do ourselves out of a job. We don't want to be there in years to come. Our goal is to enable communities, through our local partners, to continue without us, which I think we all want, don't we? I'm going to show you a video. It has an English voiceover, so you should be able to hear the sounds of the dancing and the music and then hear the person doing the voiceover so you will get the feel of it, I'm sure. [click her to read more of Janet's story and watch the video](#)

*Meet Janet Zirugo, mother of 10, grandmother of 28, great-grandmother of 8. The four generations of Janet's family: Junior Kadore, 1 (great grandson), Patience Muzengeza, 31 (granddaughter), Chipso Zirugo, 49 (daughter); Janet Zirugo, 70. Janet's love for her family keeps her going even in the hardest time. Janet has seen many changes in her lifetime.*

***'When we were children, we didn't worry about the challenges ahead.'***

*Janet has lived through extreme hardship. Drought has ravaged her village, leaving her community hungry.*

***'In the drought, we ate things which we wouldn't normally eat. My heart was so painful thinking that my family would die. But by God's Grace, they did not.'***

*Thanks to kind people like you, Janet was given training and drought-resistant seeds. Janet has learned the best techniques to farm in dry land and her garden has flourished.*

***'This project has changed our lives for the better. What makes me happy is to see my family strong and well fed.'***

*Janet has become successful through the opportunities she has seized. She is now able to provide for her family.*

***'I take them to school because I dream that if they have a good education, they will look after me in the future.'***

***'God be with me and my family. Please look after them, Lord. Look after my livestock, my husband, and me too. Give me strength to fend for my family.'***

So I want to thank you that every time you put a penny in an envelope, or you do something for Christian Aid, you make a huge difference. And it isn't just money in an envelope, it changes people's lives; like Janet; like Jessica. And I'm going to finish with a short story going back to the Amazonian rainforest and speaking to a Church leader in the middle of that community.

One day there was a kind of earthquake, the ground shock, everybody went running to the Church; they put their hands against the Church walls because they saw it was shaking. I think I might run out of the door if I'm honest, but not them. And they pushed with all their might, and they prayed with all their might that their Church would stay standing. And then the Church leader told me this, 'Julian, when you go back to from where you come from, say to people that we are so grateful for what those people do, they have never met us and we know that everybody has needs, no matter who they are, we all have needs. But the only thing that we can do is to pray for them so that when you speak I will pray that they will have energy, that they will experience the love of God and so right now I hope that in some way you kind of make that connection with that Church leader, Enrique, in the middle of the Amazonian rainforest who has prayed for you, and may we all stand together, pushing against poverty, making a difference in our world with tangible expressions of love, pointing back to the love of Christ. Amen.