

## **Sermon for Sunday 22 September 2024 – The Seventeenth Sunday after Trinity**

**Alex Cassidy, Christian Aid Church Engagement and Fundraising Officer for East Anglia**

***Jeremiah 11.18-20, Psalm 54, James 3.13–4.3, 7-8a, Mark 9.30-37***

Good morning, everybody. I'm Alex Cassidy. I work at Christian Aid. I've worked at Christian Aid for about three and a half years, and I am the Church Engagement and Fundraising Officer for East Anglia, which is not the pithiest title in the world. Nevertheless, I live in Cambridge and I travel around Essex and Suffolk and Norfolk, and I meet supporters and talk to them, which is marvellous. Let me begin this morning by saying that it's a joy to be with you here today for the service and to join you in prayer and thanksgiving for the work of Christian Aid and for the people around the world whose lives are touched by that work and for the many different ways in which Christian Aid supporters, and in this congregation, give so generously to make that work possible. Christian Aid's foundation happened in a world torn apart in the aftermath of the Second World War, in the words of the Prophet Isaiah, by ruthless nations. Christians in this country, wanting to embody God's hope for the world, came together were in response to the plight of refugees in a devastated Europe. They recognised in those strangers a calling to love their neighbour and to act to help other people to live life in all its fullness.

That initial response evolved over the subsequent decades into Christian Aid, at different times and in different places, a stronghold to the poor, to the needy in distress, a shelter from the storm. Earlier in the year, during Christian Aid Week, we focused on the story of a brave mother in Burundi called Aline. Aline's experience of great cruelty and pain at the hands of a violent husband led her to hit rock bottom when eventually her husband married another woman and forced Aline to leave her home. He prevented her from taking their four sons and two daughters with her and in a further act of cruelty, told the local community that Aline was mentally ill and unable to care for her children. She was plunged into the most extreme poverty, but she prioritised staying close by so her children would be able to find her if they, too, were ejected from the family home or they managed to escape. Hungry and scorned and alone, Aline feared for her life, knowing how vulnerable she was as a woman living alone on Burundi streets, and she was constantly worried about the safety of her children. But she took the first step back from the brink when she participated in a transformative three-day community workshop run by one of Christian Aid's partners.

She learned how to form a Village Savings and Loans Association and established a steady income. Microfinance schemes like this mean that people can save for their future and borrow money to kickstart small businesses, shifting from subsistence farming to having the power to

build a future, a future filled with hope. With that small loan, Aline was able to start her own business trading avocados and peanuts in the local area. With those profits, she bought a bicycle so she could transport greater quantities of goods to markets further afield. Eventually, her hard work had earned the money she needed to rent a house, and she was joined by three of her children. Now, Aline lives peacefully on her own plot of land in a remote village in the Macamba province in Burundi. She's baking her own bricks to build her own home for her and her children. Now, she can afford food, clothes, and essential health care for her family. She's also purchased solar panels so her children can do their evening homework by electric light. Aline was determined to push back against the inhumanity of poverty, driven by hope, faith, and the love for her children.

Sometimes we encounter extraordinary stories of love persisting through the most challenging situations. Aline offers us one such story. Aline's love for her children and for her community is evident in all that she does. She's held on to faith, hope, and love, even when extreme poverty pushed her to the brink of survival. Aline's story gives us an insight into of what love can mean. Perhaps love can be expressed through poetry and flowers and hearts and so on. But it's also shown in the solar panels that give Aline's children light to complete their schoolwork. In the Village Savings and Loans Association, where community members support one another, it's in each brick of the home that Aline is building for her family, and it's in the meals that she shares with her neighbours. In his first letter, the Corinthians, Paul talks a lot about love, and he can't stop at one or two definitions. We hear that love is patient, it's kind, it rejoices in the truth. Love means we persist, we hope, we believe. Love is endless. Paul is reaching for something there that he acknowledges as inexpressible in this life. The fullness of love that we'll find when we know God as God knows us.

This passage is often read at weddings, but Paul wasn't really writing about married couples, he was writing about the church. This part of the letter to the Corinthians addresses unity and diversity in church communities, particularly when it comes to sharing and celebrating our different gifts. We see this in the previous chapter where Paul writes about the gifts of the spirit, which may be different in each person, but which are given by God for the common good. Paul encourages the church of Corinth to rejoice in valued diversity in a united community. As the biblical scholar Richard B Hayes has written, chapter 13 of this letter is therefore a challenge to the church to ask whether and how we are practising love, both within and beyond our community? Are we a church that works to allow human beings to flourish and share their diverse gifts? This is the theme picked up in our reading from James this morning. Through scripture, we will always have for us, and we love because God has loved us, and we're invited into a relationship knowing and being known with our creator. Love is how we practise discipleship and how we follow our calling as children of God.

Love is the serious business of being seen by God for who we are. And love is the moreness of God who exceeds what we know and whose mercy and compassion is beyond measure. And love is one of Christian Aid's core values, standing together with dignity, equality, and justice. Why? Because love is the core of who we are. God's love transforms us. It gives us the strength to choose to love people living in poverty who we've never met. It gives us the empathy to create change for good. Love is our motivation; it drives us to stand in solidarity with our global neighbours against poverty and injustice. It moves us to strive for a world where everyone has fullness of life. It sustains us with energy and passion as we commit to working alongside our global neighbours worldwide. Situations such as the one that Aline found herself in can feel helpless. When we think about what is happening in Israel Palestine right now, it's hard to imagine how that situation can be resolved.

But in Christianity, hope is a virtue, and virtues are something we must practise. Hope isn't a facile sunny optimism. It's not a bet in the face of any evidence to the contrary, that tomorrow will turn out better than today. Rather, hope is a recognition that when we open ourselves to the power of the Holy Spirit, God fulfils his promises. As the American writer, Jim Wallace, put it, hope unbelieved is always considered nonsense. But hope believed is history in the process of being changed. That vision of people united by hope and the support that it animates is what enables our work in 26 countries around the world, spending £93 million last year, delivering 275 projects that directly reach nearly 3 million people and indirectly impacted almost 18 million people. Work supporting women in Malawi to organise into cooperatives to get better prices for their crops, and to process those crops into commercial products. Work in Ukraine, helping people displaced by the war to begin to rebuild their lives through material and psychological support. And work in South Sudan, working with churches to build peace from the community level upwards. Thankfully, nothing we do is done simply under our own steam. As Paul writes in his letter to the Philippians, do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your request to God, and the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

When we open ourselves to the gift of the Holy spirit, the God who proclaims good news to the poor, freedom for prisoners, and recovery of sight from the blind, he confounds our expectations. God makes himself known where we're least expecting it, in small acts of witness shared in by Jesus, who participated in our human fragility. There is much in Christian aid's work that echoes these themes. Our work is ultimately sustained by small acts of love, which in combination have achieved extraordinary change. I'm thinking of the role played by Christian Aid in helping to forge the Fair Trade Movement and of the work done to support the settlement in this country of Ugandan Asians, fleeing from Idi Amin, and the work building the movement for debt justice that helped lead to debt cancellation in the late '90s and early 2000s, or the growing campaign across

churches and beyond in calling for justice for communities on the front line of the climate crisis who have contributed little to carbon emissions, but who are facing growing difficulties in adapting to its effects. Work that led to important commitments to a new fund for climate loss and damage a couple of years ago at the UN Climate Conference in Egypt.

All of this work is sustained by giving, action, and prayer from people like yourselves who feel called through their Christian faith to respond, and by the efforts of our many partners around the world who are often working in exceptionally difficult conditions to support people in poverty, to live with dignity, and to actively shape their lives for the better. The story of Christian aid could perhaps be described as the story of people surprising themselves with what can be done when they come together in faith and in love. So thank you all for the many ways in which you've supported our work. It's a great act of Christian witness and a great act of preparation for the coming of God's Kingdom. I'd like to end with the words of St. Teresa of Avila, Christ has no body now but yours, no hands, no feet on earth but yours. Yours are the eyes through which Christ lets compassion into the world. Yours are the feet with which Christ walks to do good. Yours are the hands with which Christ blesses the world. Thank you. Amen.