250511 All Saints, Hove: Easter 4 and Christian Aid Week

Acts 9.36-end; Ps 23; rev 7.9-end; John 10.22-30

At the Brighton Festival a couple of years ago the British Nigerian historian, David Olusoga, was in conversation with that year's Festival Director in the Dome, 1600 people listening. They were talking about 'contested histories', and the emergence of history from cultues that are not the dominant culture in the UK. Olusoga said: "My job is not to make you feel guilty. My job is to tell stories that either we have forgotten or that we did not know. It is for the artists to tell us their meaning."

At the start of Christian Aid Week, my job is not to make you feel guilty. My job is to tell stories that we have forgotten or did not know. It's for us as a church to work out what they mean for us, and it's your job is to work out what they mean for you.

Let's start with today's Bible readings.

In the Easter readings from the Acts of the Apostles.

> The Church is going out, from Jerusalem to…. Rome.

We are in Joppa - a port on the Mediterranean coast. Christianity has come from Jerusalem and is getting connected to the wider world.

> There was a disciple whose name was Tabitha, which in Greek is Dorcas.

The languages is changing; from the Hebrew and Aramaic of Jesus to the Greek of the eastern Mediterranean. Indeed, the New Testament was written in Greek. Christianity came from God through the Jews to the world. "God so loved the world..."

> And the early Church is seeking to understand the meaning of Easter and their new faith in the risen Christ.

They are facing new things. What happens when good people die, a widow devoted to good works and charity? They sent for the disciples, who were not far away in Lydda, and Peter told the apparently dead Tabitha to get up from her sleep. This is the early Church experiencing the miraculous sharing in Christ's resurrection.

In the passage we heard from Revelation, probably written a little later than Acts but certainly in the context of events at the end of the 1st century of the Christian era, there's a different account of death and resurrection. Those who experienced persecution, "the great ordeal", have their robes washed in white in the blood of the Lamb, who will be their shepherd and guide them to the springs of the water of life and God will wipe away their tears. Here is a promise to those who stand firm in trials and tribulations. In Christ, they will inherit eternal life.

The Church, from the very beginning, has been thinking, saying, doing new things. Christianity is a missionary religion and has found itself in a variety of cultures, spreading the word that Christ is Risen and telling the truth that this changes people and gives us all life.

We are called to be people who live now as if we are already citizens of God's kingdom.

In the Gospel today the good shepherd cares for his sheep. And we could hear the uncertainty about who is in and who is out, why some people don't hear or ignore good news.

Which means those of us who 'get it', or want it, or want to attempt it, live by faith, in hope, with love.

We heard similar themes this week around the election of the new Pope, Leo XIV.

He spoke to the Church and world in Italian and Spanish, not in his first language English. In the days since his election we have learned he was born in Chicago, was the head of an international missionary community and worked in Peru, most recently as a bishop. His family are a classic American melting pot of French, Italian and all sorts. Cardinal Vincent Nicholls identified him not as American or Peruvian but as a citizen of the world.

He's also an interesting mix ecclesiastically. He dressed more traditionally and ornately than Francis and has a devotion to Mary. His first words were of peace, to the Church and to the world. He addressed us all and talked about building bridges through dialogue and of defeating evil.

And in his taking the name Leo we have been reminded of the last Pope Leo, the XIII, who in 1891 wrote an encyclical, a letter, Rerum Novarum, on “New Things”, still highly regarded Catholic social teaching addressing the major changes of industrialism and calling for the fair treatment of labour and dignity at work.

Pope Leo XIV seemed to be saying, there are always new things, and the Church will continue to develop and change by addressing the issues of our day. What is God doing *now* and how do we best point to the kingdom of God which is our goal and our home?

This week we have also been reminded about what Europe was doing 8o years ago at the end of WWII when after the parties all sorts of work was begun to bring people together and build a better world.

As one small part of this, Christian Aid was founded, Churches Together in Britain and Ireland, working together for post-War peace and reconciliation, giving aid from Christians to the poorest whoever they are, regardless of their beliefs, and seeking greater justice; nowadays working with local partners who identify how best to address poverty and development in their communities.

As we learned again more recently during the COVID pandemic, we live together on this one roomed earth, our common home. We were reminded, I am not well until you are well, until everyone is well.

Stories from Scripture that we are called to love God and love our neighbour as ourselves and that everyone is our neighbour because, “God so loved the world”.

Stories from the Church, always addressing ‘new things’ in the way of God in Jesus Christ.

Stories from our own experience of the joy of a peaceful life that is better together when we recognise everyone is our neighbour.

And as it is Christian Aid Week, here’s a thing that I have learned about giving from poor people. Being able to give is one of the most basic things that makes us human.

Someone I didn't know gave me £5 for a charity. She told me a long story about how many years ago her mother had been helped by the charity and this was the first time she herself was able to make a gift so the charity would be able to help someone else. She glowed with pleasure at being able to make the gift that meant so much to her.

Or the person who looked as though they had nothing who sat me down on an orange box and gave me tea and a biscuit, which seemed to be all they had, when I visited them to sympathise about their son being beaten up because he is a Bengali in East London.

As a representative of the Church, I have been privileged to visit other parts of the world. In Juba in the South Sudan, one of the poorest and most divided countries on earth, the Mothers Union made a feast of rice and greens whilst we met. They danced and sang with joy and thanksgiving as they served it to their much more affluent guests.

We know it for ourselves, that giving is good for us. Be thankful for what God has given you, be generous to those in need.

We're the first generation to be so connected with the world around us that we can't say we do not know that we live in a world where people die because of poverty – malnutrition, poor health care, lack of money. Where simple investment in education and local economic development changes lives and helps people to flourish.

Yet we are also so well protected that we don't really know about sacrificial giving. Paradoxically, the poor are our teachers. Like the widow in the Bible, who gave her mite.

Christian Aid is one way of our addressing these issues and of our making a response to world development as a church together. All that is being asked of you is to give something this week or next in the CA envelopes and return it as part of the church offertory. Or of you want, take a few envelopes and ask family, friends or neighbours if they would like to contribute and bring it back next week for the offertory. But there is something much bigger going on.

If you want to know what a person believes, ask them what they spend their money on. Ask yourself. It's challenging. Who am I? And who is my neighbour?'

St Martin was a Roman soldier in the C4th. He was the first to be made a saint not because of the way he died, a martyr, but because of the way he lived, a confessor. On a cold winter's day, near the city of Amiens in northern France, he cut his cloak in half and give half to a beggar who was naked. That night the beggar returned to him in a dream, as Christ. We can't hear that story without thinking of Jesus saying, "For as much as you did it to one of the least of these you do it to me."

We think of giving as charity, it makes us feel good, but the greater blessing is on us. It's true. "It is more blessed to give than to receive" because it shows us who we are and what we believe.

At the start of Chistian Aid Week, my job is to tell stories that either we have forgotten or that we did not know. It is for you to decide on their meaning.

[What's true for individuals is true for countries. There used to be a cross-Party consensus that we would give 0.7% of our GDP to overseas aid. It was enlightened self-interest. Under the previous government and this one it has been reduced so that the amount of aid actually going overseas is reduced to 0.15% GDP.]