May 10th 2020 Christian Aid Week sermon

John 14:1-14

To mark Christian Aid Week, Christian Aid has commissioned some polling around the perception of faith leaders and as part of that asked UK public which fictional TV vicar they would most trust to guide the nation through a crisis such as the coronavirus pandemic.

I wonder who you think topped the poll? You may well have guessed it. It was the Revd Geraldine Granger, aka the Vicar of Dibley. It made me wonder what it is about her – aside from the sublime script and phenomenal characters and cast – that helped her beat the others? The vicar who loved her chocolate above most things, who would sometimes hide when parishioners came to the door and became extremely distracted when handsome visitors came to her village. My hunch is that it was exactly that, her humanity that made people warm to her, as she fell in puddles and lurched from one challenge to the next.

In today’s reading we meet the disciples feeling very human themselves at the Last Supper, beginning to realise that their dreams of overthrowing the Romans and winning over the Temple authorities, were just that, dreams. All that they had known for the past couple of years, everything they had done and seen had been focused on Jesus, their Rabbi, their teacher, and he is now saying he is going away.

Little wonder then that the ‘Do not let your hearts be troubled’ at the start of this reading seems to have fallen on deaf ears. Like Thomas and Philip, we may want to know the details in this time of global crisis, but Jesus wants them and us to see the big picture, the big picture he has been painting with his whole life and ministry. He has been sent because God loves us, because God wants to be in relationship with us and wants more for us and for this world.

This evening our prime minister is going to give us a road map from lockdown into the new future. And here we have Jesus explaining to his friends and to us that if we want to understand what we are to do and be, then he is the key, ‘the way, the truth, the life’. Only Jesus is much more than a map – the ‘way’ is *hodos* in ancient Greek and as well as meaning road it also means the movement along it, the journey. Following Jesus requires us to act, to respond to his love, to take part in the healing, forgiving, restoring, reconciling ministry he began. So central was this call to action that the earliest Christians were called The Way, because they lived differently, changed from within because of their encounter with Jesus.

Long before the X Factor overplayed the word, Jesus invited us to go on a journey.

And it’s not a journey we travel alone, relationship is emphasised in this reading, we hear in v 10 ‘I am in the father and the father is in me’. In some translations. ‘The father dwells in me’. The disciples may have thought that the Jesus revolution was going to end with the triumphant rebuilding of the Temple in Jerusalem, the place where the Jewish people believed that God and people, heaven and earth met. But instead Jesus, the man in front of them, tells the disciples that God is not simply rooted in a physical building but is *in him*. And in the next verses he explains that God will send the Holy Spirit, so we, you and I, are never alone, so God’s spirit can dwell in us. Not just be confined to one temple, in one city in one corner of the globe, but alive and in us. And in these days when our church buildings, our offices, our schools, our cafes are closed we have had more opportunity to reflect on what it might mean to dwell in the father’s presence and to have God’s spirit within us.

Last weekend perhaps to everyone’s surprise, a 2,500 year-old blessing from scripture and YouTube collided when a love-song from God was sung by members of over 65 UK churches for everyone who needs to know they are loved. The song, The UK Blessing went viral, and has been seen over 1.8million times in under a week.

It speaks powerfully, movingly and passionately of God’s closeness to us, praying God’s blessing, that his presence will go before you
And be behind you, beside you
All around you, and within you
and that you will know He is with you, He is with you.

Listening to The Blessing UK for the first time and in fact since, I was moved to tears, it speaks to me beyond the beautiful music, the harmonies the lyrics, it expresses things I can’t articulate and yet can recognise, it helps me glimpse a sense of God’s presence which so often I fail to see. The Celtic Christians called places where they felt God was more palpably present, the thin places, where there wasn’t much between us and the divine. Right now, away from the distractions of the world, or for those still working and overwhelmed by the realities of it, it feels as if in both cases, the thin places are more present and certainly not just in a church building.

I wonder if you have seen on the news or social media the images of the animal kingdom taking advantage of lockdown to move into territory that previously was just the domain of humans? From goats in gardens in Llandudno, to kangaroos in Adelaide, Cayotes in San Francisco and deer in Paris. There’s this dimension of life that is always there and yet so consumed by our own business we rarely see it, but we give it space and this beautiful realm becomes apparent, bringing new perspective to how we interact with the world and on a deeper level posing questions about who we are.

Lockdown is giving us opportunities – and in some ways forcing us – to ask big questions and part of that has been an exploration the spiritual realm. Research released by aid agency Tearfund last weekend showed that a quarter of adults in the UK have watched or listened to a religious service since the lockdown began and one in five of those say they have never gone to church – if that’s you, then welcome. A Christian Aid survey released today at the start of Christian Aid Week shows that 26 % of people have prayed for both an end to the Covid crisis and for key workers during this time. One in 20 of those had only started praying during this time.

Where before *competition* grabbed the headlines and fuelled the engine, suddenly *connection and* *cooperation*, working together, is making more profound sense to our hearts and lives. Author and theologian Richard Rohr, says this shouldn’t surprise us. He says that the trinity, with the intimacy and connection between father Son and HS, puts relationship at the heart of everything and that the ‘way’ of Jesus is an invitation to live, to love and relate as God does. He says: “We are intrinsically like the Trinity, living in absolute relatedness. While we might not always recognise it, we are all together in a web of mutual interdependence. A community inspired by the Trinity will be a community of people who treat each other as subjects and not objects. There is no seeking of power *over* the other in the Trinity, but only *power with*, a giving away, a sharing, a letting go, trust and mutuality.”₁

Whatever our understanding of God it’s not the rich and the powerful that seem to impress us right now, but the previously unseen selfless acts, the quiet acts of service and love. The nurses and care workers holding hands, the delivery men and women, the shopworkers, the teachers, the neighbours who reach out, the strangers helping the vulnerable. In these extraordinary times there has been isolation and yet connection with one another and perhaps also connection with who we are meant to be.

In verse 12 of today’s reading, Jesus says ‘The one who believes in me – or trusts in me in some translations – will also do the works that I do and in fact will do greater works than these.’

This verse always stops me in my tracks, Jesus is the guy who walked on water, raised the dead, healed a woman who touched his clothes, how can we do greater? But the danger is that we rush to deify Jesus, overemphasize his divinity and make his ministry of compassion and forgiveness, fighting against injustice, loving and sharing and advocating for the marginalised something that is beyond us mere humans. If we do that then we do two things – we forget that it cost him, that he, like the Vicar of Dibley, stumbled, that he wept, that he needed time out, that he pleaded for things to be different, that it was *hard*. And secondly we miss that he came to show us the way in this messy world, not just to offer life after death but life before death, to empower us ordinary people right here, right now, to continue his works and by the power of the HS, by the grace of God to do extraordinary things.

Perhaps what he means by ‘greater’ is that his disciples will help the world catch sight of God through the ages, not just in Palestine 2,000 years ago but today in Cam and Dursley, in the UK, through healing and justice in our homes and workplaces in schools and hospitals and in every corner of the globe.

This weekend the nation has marked VE Day’s 75th anniversary. Something which I find remarkable is that Christian Aid was formed just at that point, after WW2 had ended. People had looked fear and uncertainty, loss and scarcity in the eye for six years and at the end of the war, with Britain and Ireland exhausted and on its knees, our churches gave more than £80,000 (£3 million plus in today’s money) to help churches across mainland Europe meet the needs of refugees who had lost everything. A generation which had been fed a diet of ‘us and them’ for six long years nevertheless understood their common humanity with those suffering and its capacity to transform and save lives.

The task ahead of us at this defining moment in our time is monumental. The current pandemic and the fallout from the response to it are potentially catastrophic for the developing world. The virus itself has the potential to kill millions but many more will fall into hunger and extreme poverty as a result of loss of livelihoods. The World Bank conservatively estimates that 14 million people will be pushed into extreme poverty but others believe it could be hundreds of millions.

Your support for Christian Aid is life-saving. Thank you for all of your prayers and engagement and donations. The last time we were in our church building we had a live video link up with Christian Aid’s Kenya manager Nicholas Abuya in Nairoibi (little did we know how central to our lives video calls were about to become!) and he spoke of how the climate crisis is leaving people desperately vulnerable as crops fail, how access to water is a major struggle, of how when the rains finally did come the locusts followed and are eating up precious crops and into that he told us of the fear of coronavirus. Coronavirus without soap and water for the most basic protection and coronavirus without a resilient health care system.

In Kenya and across the world all of Christian Aid’s programmes are being adapted to help mitigate the worst effects of the crisis and that takes on many different forms from the immediate healthcare initiatives you saw in the video a moment ago in the camps of people fleeing conflict in NE Nigeria, to actions to help feed people, to protect the rising numbers of victims of domestic and sexual violence and reporting on human rights abuses as authoritarian regimes take advantage of the lockdown and increased governmental powers to pursue their own aims.

As well as addressing poverty directly, Christian Aid also challenges the systems that cause poverty, systems that chase profit regardless of the cost to people and our planet, systems that are powered not by cooperation and connection but by competition, by celebrating the winners and disregarding the losers. This Christian Aid Week, what are the uncomfortable truths that we need to face up to, now that coronavirus has shone a light on the cracks in our economic systems and culture?

This Christian Aid Week is different to others and not only because we can’t meet as a community for our Big Brekkies and soup lunches or to put envelopes through doors in Cam and Dursley. It’s different because for the first time in many years we have collectively experienced vulnerability and we have an opportunity to decide how we respond to that, personally, as a nation as global citizens. When we are on the threshold of a new time it is sometimes referred to as a ‘liminal space’ a place that is between the ‘what was’ and the ‘what next.’ It is a place of transition, of waiting, and not knowing. It is often uncomfortable but Richard Rohr describes it as a good place saying: “It’s a good space where genuine newness can begin. Get there often and stay as long as you can…This is the sacred space where the old world is able to fall apart, and a bigger world is revealed. If we don’t encounter liminal space in our lives, we start idealizing normality.”₂

Just as the disciples had to adjust to a new reality, just as the post-war generation had to choose what kind of society it wanted to build, we at this critical point in May 2020 have choices to make. Will we follow Jesus’ way and emerge a people inspired by his example and his presence to build a fairer, more compassionate world? Will we continue to see the carers as critical workers we celebrate? Will we understand our connection and responsibility to those in our global supply chain? Remember what it is like to fear for our lives, unable to guarantee the safety of our loved ones and fully protect them from forces we cannot control?

My prayer is that as a church we recognise this moment and step into it as generous followers of the way, living differently, inspired by God and understanding our capacity to bring about change in response to his call to bring hope and life to all. Amen.

1. Centre for Action and Contemplation. **The Foundation of Community**Theme: [Community](https://cac.org/themes/community/) Tuesday, May 5, 2020Fr. Richard Rohr, OFM

2. Centre for Action and Contemplation **Between Two Worlds**Theme: [Liminal Space](https://cac.org/themes/liminal-space/) Sunday, April 26, 2020Fr. Richard Rohr, OFM <https://cac.org/between-two-worlds-2020-04-26/> <https://inaliminalspace.org/about-us/what-is-a-liminal-space/>