

Sermon to herald Christian Aid Week (May 10-16th)

I want to begin with a Spoiler alert for all ‘twitchers’ (or birdwatchers). We are coming to that time of year when they get excited at the prospect of seeing a very rare bird on our streets-The Lesser Spotted Christian- a shy creature, normally found sheltering in church buildings, where it loves to sing. Every spring, shortly after Easter, it could be heard tapping on doors. It can easily be distinguished from its adversary, The Greater Spotted Woodpecker, which, thinking only of its own needs, taps on trees to attract a mate. By contrast, the Lesser Spotted Christian taps on doors to attract attention to the plight of poor strangers. It changes its normal song to one less pleasing to the ear but that song would otherwise be unheard and largely unknown on our streets.

You’ve probably guessed by now that I’m referring to your brave neighbourhood Christian Aid Week collector, who, for the second year running, will not be seen on our streets – victim of Covid & lockdown regulations. Their absence is alarming because it could make the difference between life and death or wealth and poverty for many, having a more widespread and prolonged influence, worldwide, than the virus itself in our communities. However, I have found little evidence that either the church hierarchy or local churches know or are trying to lessen the impact.

In 2018/19 a record £120m was raised for Christian Aid but in the following, that figure was down by £14m, as Covid began to bite. With no door-to-door collection, due to Covid, the drop last year was probably much greater but has not been revealed. If nothing changes, this year will see another multi-million pound deficit in income from Christian Aid Week, coinciding with a huge cut in Government Aid. Astonishingly, our Diocesan magazine, The Communicant, has contained no publicity for Christian Aid Week in either its April or May Editions.

We should all be aware of the life-changing impact that Christian Aid has through its carefully chosen, pump-priming projects in Low Income Countries: the Christian Aid website is full of wondrous stories of lives transformed and I urge you to visit it: videos, even sermons, were available for use this morning. However, I would like to focus on a deep-seated flaw, which may explain why the church seems unconcerned about the shortfall in its overseas aid, which

coincides with a devastating cut in government aid. We-the church- have great difficulty in doing two things at once.

When I was a child, I was often told off for trying to do two things at once.

“You can’t do your homework AND listen to the exploits of ‘Dick Barton, Special Agent, on the radio’”, my parents told me! The dangers are obvious. In doing two things at once, we risk doing neither job properly.

Driving a car and lighting a cigarette or answering the phone can have fatal consequences. Yet most weeks- in church- we are urged to do two things at once: love God with all our heart, mind, soul and strength; and our neighbour as ourselves. We generally make a terrible hash of it, putting all our eggs in the ‘God’ basket and few-if any-in our neighbour’s basket . On the face of it, achievement is impossible -if God get’s all our love, how can there be any left for our neighbour? Is that the basic reason for the lack of concern about the shortfall in Christian Aid income?

In reality it is perfectly simple to achieve, as Jesus, God’s special agent, tells us in that opening verse of today’s Gospel (John 15, v 9-17). We simply have to love one another, AS HE, JESUS, HAS LOVED US. Thus, we can honour God fully by loving ALL his creatures, doing both at the same time.

Alas, untrue-to-form, we are stumbling into Christian Aid Week, with an overloaded ‘God’ basket. We were warned that all charitable giving would be hard hit by the pandemic and the poor would suffer. Without door-to-door collections, a comfort blanket has been ripped from under the feet of the poor.

I am guilty of neglect as anyone, blissfully unaware until last week that those normally brave enough to sing Christ’s song on our streets would be silenced again this year, with potentially devastating consequences.

All is not lost: we are a Resurrection people; we know that where there is chaos, there are also opportunities to shine. By loving others in this week for which Jesus died, we can transform lives, including our own, in several ways:

1. Be extra generous in our giving this year.

Our donations can ensure that adequate hygiene can be maintained in communities affected by double whammies-of drought or flood-due to Climate Change- as well as threat of Covid. However, nobody sees us filing an envelope or writing a cheque and we need to do more.

2. Although that elusive bird, the Lesser Spotted Christian, may not be seen its not too late to organize a sponsored, socially-distanced outdoor event, outdoor stall, zoom coffee morning or auction. The CA website is full of suggestions.
3. In the longer term, take the challenge of Climate Change – this year's Christian Aid Week theme- seriously. Refuse to be lulled into a false sense of security by lazy promises of 'net zero emissions' in 30, 20, or even 10 years time: demand and work for negative values now! Be warned by the mere ripple in atmospheric CO₂ levels that vast reductions in travel, due to Covid, have brought about in the past year. Visit the Penicuik Climate Challenge Project, due to display its colours in the old Lloyd's Chemist building, from next Saturday. Be surprised by what you can do to reduce your carbon footprint.
4. The CA website offers thoughts and prayers on Social Justice for all seasons- let's use them more in our intercessions, week-by-week, getting more eggs in the 'Neighbour' basket

We can and must do two things at once: love God by laying down our lives for our neighbours in faraway, unloved places. Swell the ranks of that endangered species, the Lesser Spotted Christian, in future: let love be seen on our streets, not just for a week but every week.

Neville

[Christian Aid prayer]

Great God,

Who makes the sun to rise, and opens the heavens

Hear the cry of the people

Who sow in hope for rain, but reap only despair

Hear the cry of the people

Seeking shelter from the storm, their hopes and homes submerged

Hear the cry of the people,

When creation is hitting back, with rage and resistance

Give us hope, grant us salvation,

Give us a new relationship with creation
With reverence to tend this gift from You
And say once again of the earth and all you created
It is GOOD.