

Christian Aid Week

sermon notes

Sunday 10 May, 2020

These sermon notes are written in the light of the coronavirus pandemic. You may like to use these notes as part of a virtual service during Christian Aid Week, or for personal devotion. You can find more resources at caweek.ie/virtualworship

Alternatively, you might like to use some of the pre-recorded service resources we have put together, including a sermon (given by Rev Dr Liz Hughes, Chair of Christian Aid Ireland's Board), readings, children's talk, prayers and a song. These are available as sections to be inserted into your service or as a whole recording, and are available at caweek.ie/virtualworship

Psalm 31:1-5, 15-16

- The psalms have taken on even greater meaning in these exceptional days of the coronavirus global pandemic. The Revised Common Lectionary selects seven verses from Psalm 31, but it is well worth reading all 24 verses. While the context in which the psalm is written may not be the same as our circumstances, it expresses many of the honest emotions of grief and lament that many of us are currently experiencing. Verse 24 alone is one that many may find helpful to meditate on in these days when we wait on the Lord for the strength and courage that we otherwise find difficult to summon.
- The psalmist prays, as we do now, for the refuge and fortress of God to protect us and for deliverance from that which is hidden and invisible to us but would threaten our very lives (verses 3 and 4). While written as an individual's prayer, the psalmist inspires our collective prayer for the global community:

God, incline your ear to us;
rescue us speedily.
Be a rock of refuge for us,
a strong fortress to save us.
In your mercy, hear our prayer.

- In these days of isolation, when we have had to retreat to the fortress of our own homes, may we gain a

new understanding of God as our fortress, the place of security and safety we turn to in this time of trial. God is not a fortress that barricades but strengthens and reinforces, enabling us to look out for our most vulnerable neighbours, near and far – albeit virtually or from a safe distance.

- There is something refreshingly honest about these prayers of lament which tell God how things really are, and this shows that God is interested in our physical suffering and our bodily wellbeing. That's important to remember these days. The description of the psalmist's symptoms is very resonant with our contemporary experience.
- Jesus also turned to the psalms for strength and courage when enduring suffering. It is verse 5 of this psalm that Jesus quotes on the cross: 'into your hand I commit my spirit'. This verse takes on particular poignancy as we face the reality that coronavirus has and will lead to the end of life for many of our neighbours, near and far. It is into the hands of God that we entrust them to his eternal keeping.
- And how we view our neighbours in these threatening times is brought into sharp focus in verse 11. Some have found it easy to 'other' distant neighbours who were thought to be carriers of the virus, holding them in contempt rather than compassion. Or we can find



ourselves judging our closer neighbours who are panic buying important goods, while failing to understand the fear that motivated them. When the virus reached the UK, some of us became an 'object of dread' for even our closest friends – maybe even an object of dread for ourselves as we feared meeting others and infecting them.

- Yet, Christian Aid Week has always been about how we can be good global neighbours. Asking ourselves how we can extend the love that never fails to our neighbours near and far has never been more important than it is this year.
- When our own hands and the hands of others have become something of a threat, and when many are no longer experiencing the reassuring touch of a hand on a shoulder, or no longer being comforted by the embrace of a hug, the references to hands in verses 5, 8 and 15 are also particularly poignant. It feels particularly apt to pray, with the trust of the psalmist, that our times are in God's hands and also for deliverance from hands that might harm us, including our own.
- This absence of touch was also a great challenge for communities in Sierra Leone during the Ebola outbreak of 2014. The cultural practice of washing the bodies of the deceased was banned and made the process of saying goodbye to loved ones even more heart-wrenching and painful. And like how we see many of our clergy providing vital support and connection through online streaming of services, ministers and pastors in Sierra Leone had to take to the streets to get these essential public health messages out that in the end saved thousands of lives. The Rev Christiana Sutton-Koroma, who was instrumental in encouraging safe and dignified burials, describes the response of faith leaders here: [youtube.com/watch?v=D6ibrD1B130](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D6ibrD1B130)
- As we wash our hands more carefully and more often, we can pray to God to hold in his care all those we have held hands with, carried and hugged. We can also pray for those who we have never had the opportunity to physically embrace, but who we have reached out to with generous hands, giving what we could through our envelopes during many previous Christian Aid Weeks. Please join us in prayer this Christian Aid Week (10-16 May) at caid.ie/loveneverfails

- We at Christian Aid are incredibly grateful to all who have delivered and collected Christian Aid Week envelopes by hand over these past 60+ years. And for all the hands that have made soup for church lunches, poured cups of tea and coffee, made toast for Big Brekkies, put up posters and bunting advertising events, sorted books and art for sale, and of course counted and returned the money collected. Thank God for the hands that have put love into action.
- The world's poorest people are the most vulnerable to this crisis. They are less resilient, have less access to healthcare and will be less able to weather the economic impact. Thanks to your support, we have been standing alongside them for the past 75 years. We'll continue to stand with them through this crisis and will be with them afterwards. Now more than ever, please share your love for your vulnerable neighbours. Perhaps you would consider giving regularly to Christian Aid to support their work by visiting caweek.ie/regulargift or making a donation today through caweek.ie/churchcollection
- Thank God and pray for the hands of all those working on the medical frontline now to help save lives, in Britain and Ireland and around the world. May their times be in God's hands, may God's face shine upon them. May the unfailing, steadfast love of God be their constant strength (verse 16).

John 14:1-14

- The promises in this gospel reading are often offered as hope and reassurance at times of bereavement and will have a resonance for those who have lost loved ones in recent weeks and months, whether or not as a direct consequence of coronavirus. We have always believed in life before death, and find in these words of Jesus challenge and inspiration for this exceptional Christian Aid Week.
- The comforting words of Jesus: 'do not let your hearts be troubled' are spoken to the disciples who have good reason to have troubled hearts. Jesus says these words at the last supper, just after he has washed their feet with his own hands, talked of his betrayal, and of Peter's denial and his imminent departure (John 13). These are words of comfort offered for unsettling times and are worth meditating on in these challenging times today.

- With coronavirus resulting in many of us spending much more time in our houses, the spaciousness of the Father's house, with many dwelling places, may sound appealing, particularly to those struggling to find their own space. 'Dwelling place' isn't a term that we often use these days to describe the places where we live, but in this time of forced isolation our homes have become places to dwell more than we may have ever known before.
- Jesus uses the word 'dwell' again when he talks of 'the Father who dwells in me' (verse 10). And in these days when our church buildings have had to remain largely empty and closed for Sunday worship, we are presented with the possibility of gaining a deeper understanding of what it is to dwell in the Father's presence and to know what it is to have God's Spirit dwell in us.
- Where many are turning to mindfulness and meditation in these anxious times, this gospel also offers us the invitation to spend time dwelling in the presence of God, and to not let our hearts be troubled. For those who can find the space, our homes can become our hermitage or *poustinia* – a dwelling place for spiritual retreat - and when we are finally able to leave our homes we can still carry this dwelling place in our hearts wherever we go.
- The gospels remind us how Jesus frequently rises early in the morning to take the time to abide with and in God. Maybe it is this dwelling with the Father that Jesus is referencing when he talks of doing the 'works that I do', along with the healing, ministering, speaking truth to power. This time to dwell with the Father is the source of all his speaking and doing in the world. May we also take strength from our time with God as we consider what we can do in response to these exceptional times.
- The honesty of Thomas in verse 5, a prelude to his honesty after missing the resurrection appearance, is an honesty to be welcomed in these difficult times. We share his uncertainty as we don't know what lies ahead. Coronavirus has disrupted all routine and has many of us also saying: 'we don't know the way'. Thomas' confusion invites us all to be honest in prayer before God and to be honest with each other as we seek to follow Jesus in these exceptional times.
- At some point, perhaps not quite yet, we too need to face up to the honest questions that the response to coronavirus prompts us to ask - questions such as how we can reimagine and recreate a world where no one dies of preventable diseases, that we already have vaccinations for and medicines to treat – why are there still more than 7,500 children under 5 dying every day from such diseases? These questions take on a greater resonance this Christian Aid Week.
- In response to their confusion, Jesus' response: 'I am the way, the truth and the life,' takes on new meaning through the lens of coronavirus. How precious life has become when we have come so close to our human frailty and vulnerability. What are the new truths that we need to face up to, now that coronavirus has shone a light on the weakness and cracks in our economic systems? What is the new way we can all walk together to ensure fullness of life for everyone?
- This gospel passage concludes with the call to action we are encouraging in this digital Christian Aid Week - a call to prayer. Right in the middle of the last supper, Jesus encourages the disciples to ask him for anything and he'll do it. He repeats his offer 'that he will do whatever you ask in his name'. These are hard words to reconcile with the prayers that have seemingly gone unanswered in these difficult days. And they may have been difficult for the disciples to accept in the events that were to follow in the days to come.
- These are the words Jesus wants his disciples, his followers, to remember when he's no longer with them. He wants them to come to him, as he does the Father, with every cause, concern and request, even if they can no longer see him or be with him in person. These are words of hope and promise of connection for us all and always, but particularly in these days when we are so separate, but never alone. Physical absence and separation do not mean abandonment, and by entering into the dwelling place of God in prayer, he brings us back to the way, the truth and the life, again and again.

