

# Christian Aid Week 2024

## Notes for Preachers & Speakers

### Extraordinary Love

Thank you for supporting us this Christian Aid Week. The theme of our service materials in 2024 is 'Extraordinary Love'. We invite you to explore with your church God's love for us and our call to love our neighbour. You can also engage with the story of Aline [pronounced Ahh-leen] Nibogora from Makamba Province in Burundi. Aline has persevered against the odds, persisting in faith, hope and love, even when pushed to the brink by extreme poverty.

This pack contains notes on a range of scripture passages that you can use in a Christian Aid Week service or church event.

We begin with notes for a sermon or talk on love, drawing on **1 Corinthians 13.1-13**. Many of the themes explored here are also relevant to other suggested passages and to the readings from the Revised Common Lectionary, as explained below.



*Aline Nibogora praying with her family in her home in Makamba Province, Burundi*

Additional suggested readings are **Psalms 86.1-7; Matthew 25.31-40; Mark 12.28-3**.

Suggested readings from the Revised Common Lectionary are **John 17:6-19** (Sunday 12<sup>th</sup> May) and **Acts 2.1-21** (Sunday 19<sup>th</sup> May – Pentecost).

We hope these notes will inspire you as you prepare your sermons and talks.

### 1 Corinthians 13.1-13: What is Love?

- What is love? Think about all the depictions and symbols of love that surround us. You could show some well-known symbols of love to those present. For example: a rose, a family photo, a heart, a picture from a TV show or film that shows us an "ideal" couple or family. Isn't it curious that even when we have so many ways to represent love available to us, love is somehow bigger than all of them?

- Sometimes we encounter extraordinary stories of love persisting through the most challenging situations. This Christian Aid Week, Aline Nibogora offers us one such story. Aline's love for her children and for her community is evident in all she does. She has 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 what love can mean. Perhaps love can be expressed in hearts and flowers but it is 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; in each brick of the home that Aline is building for her family; in the meals she shares with her neighbours.
- In his letter to the Corinthians, Paul can't stop at one or two definitions of love. We hear that love is patient, kind, rejoices in the truth. Love means we persist, we hope, we believe. Love is endless. In the final part of the reading, Paul is reaching for something that he acknowledges is inexpressible in this life – the fullness of love that we will find when we know God as God knows us.
- This passage is often chosen as a reading for weddings. But Paul wasn't writing about married couples here. 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 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 are given 'for the common good' (12.7). Paul encourages the church at Corinth to rejoice in and value diversity within a united community ('For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ.'12.12).
- As the biblical scholar Richard B. Hays 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 all human beings to flourish and share their diverse gifts? (See Richard B. Hays, *First Corinthians*, 2011).
- Throughout scripture we see that love between human beings images the love the God has for us, has always had for us, and will always have for us. We love *because* God has loved us (1 John 4.19). We are invited into relationship – knowing and being known – with our Creator. Love isn't, then, just cards, kisses, flowers, hugs – though it

can be expressed through those things. Love is how we practice discipleship, how we follow our calling as children of God. Love is the serious business of being seen by God for who we are (we might call this judgement). Love is the 'more-ness' of God who exceeds what we know and whose mercy and compassion is beyond measure.

- 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, and 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.

### **Psalm 86.1-7: '...for to you do I cry all day long'**

- Aline told Christian Aid: **'God comforts you through troubled times and gives you hope for a better future.'**
- Consider the Psalmist's expression of trust and faith in God. In verse 7 there is confidence that prayer in times of difficulty will be answered. Too often, however, texts like this have been used by people in a more privileged position to speak *about* those who are struggling. We are tempted to tell the person who is suffering to be simply to be patient and wait for God to respond. Instead we should consider what the Psalm tells us about the importance of 'crying out' (see verse 3) for justice both in prayer and in other ways. The Psalmist does not keep silent but instead 'cries all day long'.
- The Psalmist speaks of God's 'abounding love' and goodness. Suffering is shown here to be a violation of what our good and loving God desires for each and all of us. The passage expresses faith that God is on the side of those who suffer.
- You might invite those present to reflect on difficult times in their life. Were they able to pray? Did they bring their troubles to God? Have they received help from those around them? What has made a difference to them when they were struggling?



- Trust in God as our comforter should not to be used to silence those who speak up against injustice. As the Psalm affirms, God hears the cries of the distressed and the oppressed. To follow the ways of our loving God, we must join in the work of responding to those calls.

## **Matthew 25.31-40: 'I was a stranger and you welcomed me'**

- Here Jesus sets out in the strongest terms the call to serve one another. We are called to love in action, serving our neighbours by ending hunger and thirst, by sheltering and caring for those who have been unjustly treated. We are to show this love in action not only to people we know but also to the 'stranger', who we should welcome as a friend.
- Theologian James H. Cone interprets this passage as taking aim at the idea that caring for others is some kind of "added extra" in life. On the contrary, Cone says, Jesus is telling us that caring is a fundamental part of what it is to be human. The people who inherit the kingdom (verses 33-36) cared not because they hoped for a reward from God. Instead, they saw the humanity of the person in front of them and responded to that humanity out of love. Caring is not an optional extra or a means to an end. It is the way in which we come to truly know ourselves and others as human.
- We are 'blessed' (verse 34) if we are people who can see and love one another in this way. Our acts of love and care mirror God's love for every person. And this leads not only to knowing ourselves and one another but also to knowing Jesus. As Cone says, knowing Jesus is not about accepting an abstract idea. We meet Jesus when we get stuck into the practical work of compassion. (See Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation*, Fortieth Anniversary Edition, 2010).



*Aline helping her sons and neighbours to wash their hands before a meal in her home.*

## Mark 12.28-31: Loving God, Loving Our Neighbour

- Aline told Christian Aid: **'Here in Burundi, a neighbour is considered a member of the family'**.
- This reading underlines the link between loving God and loving one another, as explored above in the notes on the 1 Corinthians passage. Our love of neighbour follows from the love that we offer God. And God has always, already offered us love greater than we can imagine.
- We can see how Aline lives out love of neighbour as a daily reality. She helps and supports her neighbours, just as she does members of her own family. How wholehearted are we in our love for God and for our neighbours? How can we recommit to living out this love in action? What actions will we take this week to show love to those affected by poverty?
- Love isn't always easy. When unjust structures seek to diminish you or others – when you or others are made to feel less than human - love can be an act of resistance. The American author bell hooks points to Martin Luther King Jr's statement that he *decided* to love. King made an active commitment to practice love. hooks suggests that to choose to love is a choice 'against domination, against oppression'. To commit to loving other people is to commit to opposing the injustice that threatens human flourishing. (See bell hooks, *Outlaw Culture*, 1994).

## Sunday 12<sup>th</sup> May - John 17:6-19: Becoming One

- In this passage Jesus prays for his disciples ahead of his arrest and execution. In chapters 16 and 17 Jesus speaks of the sorrow, loss and persecution that will come to those who follow him but he also promises comfort (through the Spirit), love, peace and joy for his disciples.
- Jesus' prayer that 'they may be one, as we are one' (verse 11) directs us to consider the extraordinary love of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Jesus prays that his followers may be united by a bond that is like the unity of God's own self. Where we are tempted to draw dividing lines, Jesus' prayer tells us that our purpose is connection.



- This reading also points ahead to Jesus' death. God's love for us is so great that God became human, even to the point of death. It is with this great love that God reaches out to us, inviting us to form our own loving communities. We can respond to God's love by showing love for one another, serving one another with care and compassion.

*Aline with her son Vyukesenge Aubi outside their home.*



## **Sunday 19<sup>th</sup> May - Acts 2.1-21: A Pentecost People**

- There are links in this passage to the themes of unity and diversity explored in the notes on the 1 Corinthians reading above. Notice that with the coming of the Spirit the diverse individual languages of those present are not abolished in favour of a single common language. Those gathered continue to speak different languages but can now be understood by one another. As one of the pivotal events in the formation of the early Christian church, this remains important for the church today. The church should be a place where we rejoice in our diversity, as we are brought together in community.
- In this reading the barriers between different geographical identities are broken down. As a 'Pentecost people' we are united with our neighbours whether they are close by or across the world. This includes our neighbours in Burundi.
- What are the obstacles that stand in the way of people living out their gifts? In the power of the Spirit, we are called to speak prophetically, to dream, to speak about

our God-given visions for the world and the church. Yet there are many people around the world whose dreams and visions are denied. Structural injustices obstruct communities in the majority world as they seek to fully develop their gifts and talents.

- Aline faced marginalisation due to abuse and extreme poverty. She told Christian Aid that people **'forgot I was a human being'**. Aline has many gifts to share; she is now a community leader and spokesperson, as chair of her local Village Savings and Loan Association. She champions those who are pushing back against the inhumanity of poverty. We can't stand by and let poverty get in the way of people like Aline living out their gifts.
- This Christian Aid Week will you join us in developing your prophetic voice? We want to help churches speak truth to power. You can find out more about how to speak up prophetically against injustice [here](#). You can also explore this theme further in part one of our [Act on Poverty small group resource](#).



*Aline receiving help from a neighbour at a communal water collection site.*

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