

Christian Aid 2017 address

The readings we have heard today and had time to reflect on are powerful readings for us at the beginning of Christian Aid Week, especially the reading from John's gospel. This is such a familiar reading which we hear so often at funeral services. It brings grieving people comfort and hope for life after death, a dwelling place in God's eternal heaven.

To read these passages for the here and now of this life brings people comfort and hope today. Imagine being a refugee and hearing these words. *"You are indeed my rock and my fortress; for your name's sake lead me and guide me, take me out of the net that is hidden for me, for you are my refuge."* And then, from John's gospel, *"In my Father's house there are many dwelling-places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I am going to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also."*

Think about someone preparing a place for you, a home where you and your family can be safe. Dry and warm, a refuge from danger. A place to eat together, to share together, a place for everything that you hold dear and precious. Christian Aid seeks, with our help, to make that Biblical vision and promise a reality for the refugees, the poor and persecuted today.

Christian Aid this year is focusing on the lives of Nejebar and Noor.

Nejebar and Noor lived in Afghanistan with their five children. Noor worked as a teacher, which put him in danger when the Taliban threatened to kill anyone who worked for the government. This threat was carried out on one of their family members, whose eyes were gouged out before he was killed.

Faced with threats, bombs and war at home, they chose to try and find something better. Noor said: *'It was like suicide for us. But we took the decision that it is better to die here than to die there from war.'*

Having managed the difficult and dangerous journey to Greece, they are now living in a tent in a refugee camp. They expected to be there for ten days, but have been there for six months and there's no end in sight. They have no protection against wind and rain. There's no school for their children. And they have no idea what will happen to them now.

On the Christian Aid envelope you will see the camp where they are living. Can you imagine what it must be like to live behind barbed wire?

Sudai, their youngest child, is five but looks much younger. He hasn't been growing as he should. His abdomen is swollen. They don't know what is wrong with him. The only doctor in the refugee camp is Greek and, because of the language barrier, they haven't been able to explain that Sudai is much older than he looks. There is a picture of Sudai and his mum on the CA envelope. Despite having so little, they have taken in two brothers from Afghanistan, Faraidoon (22) and Farzad (13), who are travelling alone.

Faraidoon and Farzad don't know where their parents are, or even if they're alive, but they have found refuge with this family as they wait for news of their own. Nejebar says, *'We still have some hope that one day we will get out of here and we have hope for our children's future. Our wish is to get out from this situation and to be able to go further. We only want a peaceful life. We want our children to have an education, to go to school. The most important thing is for our children.'*

There are 65 million refugees worldwide and there are more every day. Over the Easter weekend 8,000 people were rescued from the Mediterranean fleeing from Libya. We will never know the number who died on that hazardous journey. Refugees come from so many places - fleeing violence, persecution, grinding poverty, flood and famine. They are trying to find a better future for themselves and their families - just like Nejebar and Noor.

Perhaps you remember the remarkable story of Yusra. A teenager who, with her sister, helped to save some of her fellow refugees. I find her story inspiring and wanted to share some more of her story today –

When Yusra's boat broke down between Turkey and the coast of Lesvos, on the last stretch of her long journey to escape war-torn Damascus, she and her sister, Sara, jumped into the sea to pull the boat to safety. Back in Damascus they had trained everyday as swimmers. Their father was their coach. Swimming for hours, they risked their own lives to save those of the other 20 passengers onboard. Yusra and Sara were both strong swimmers but Sara was injured during the rescue. Yusra's courage and strong swimming skills were recognized by the International Olympic Committee and she became a team member of the first ever Refugee Olympic Team, competing at the Rio Olympics in 2016. Yusra and Sara

now study full time in Germany and Yusra continues to train in the hope of competing at the next Olympic Games in Tokyo 2020.

UNHCR announced the appointment of Yusra Mardini as a Goodwill Ambassador last month. At the age of 19 she has become a powerful voice for the forcibly displaced across the world and a strong example of their resilience and determination to rebuild lives and positively contribute to host communities. She must be an inspiration to the 10 million young people across the world who are refugees. Yusra advocates for the rights of refugees to have access to safe shelter, education, livelihoods and training opportunities.

In January 2017 she represented UNHCR at the World Economic Forum in Davos, where she was the youngest participant. Addressing high profile audiences she stressed that, with the average length of exile now standing at 17 years, refugees need hope for their future and for their children, and not just a life in limbo. *“With food for our stomachs, refugees can survive. But only if they are given food for the soul will they be able to thrive,”*

Over the past year Yusra has also advocated for the refugee cause during meetings with the Pope, President Obama as well as with royalty, influential business figures and other world leaders. She said, *“There is no shame in being a refugee if we remember who we are. We are still the doctors, engineers, lawyers, teachers, students we were back at home. We are still the mothers and fathers, brothers and sisters. It was war and persecution that drove us from our homes in search of peace. That is refugee. That is who I am. That is who we all are, that growing population of people without a country. I am a refugee and I’m proud to stand for peace, for decency and dignity for all those fleeing violence. Join me. Stand with us.”*

Yusra doesn’t pull her punches and neither does Christian Aid. The message is blunt. Jesus said, *“Do to others as you would have them do to you.”* Care for the widow and orphan and the poor, welcome the stranger. In a modern idiom - ‘put your money where your mouth is’.

I heard a lovely little rejoinder this week to the comment that I am too small to make a difference: “In that case you have never shared your bedroom with a mosquito!”

We can all make a difference with our contribution, large or small. We can all be advocates for refugees, telling people about them as real individuals rather than a huge ‘problem group’.

I found out recently that 2% of the weekly offering of this church is sent to Christian Aid. Christian Aid week is our reminder and opportunity to respond even more generously again to Jesus' words. We can help to make those refuges and dwelling places that are so urgently needed for Nejebar, Noor and their children and for Faraidoon and Farzad and so many others. Can we be as generous as Nejebar and Noor to Faraidoon and Farzad in Christian Aid Week?

What is God asking you to do today?

How will you respond?

Revd Diana Cullum-Hall