

## **Acts of Charity**

*Acts 9:36-43; John 10:22-30*

Christian Aid was founded in 1945 out of a desire for British and Irish Churches to help refugees who were in desperate need after the Second World War. Those at the start of that decision looked at their present reality and were dissatisfied. They decided to do something to bring about change for those who need it most.

This has been Christian Aid's story for more than 70 years, as the charity has provided relief and long-term support for poor communities around the world, while highlighting suffering, tackling injustice and championing the rights of all people made in God's image.

At times this desire to bring about positive change has meant telling uncomfortable truths to those in power who might not want to hear it. It has meant looking not just at the poverty and inequality that exists in the here and now, but the structural root causes that have led to the situations in which so many of the world's most vulnerable find themselves.

Speaking truth to power has been a fundamental part of Christian Aid's approach for decades. The charity takes its inspiration from the biblical prophets who often had to go against the grain in order to paint a picture of the way in which they believed God wanted the world to be. Sometimes that meant 'doom-saying' – lamenting about what was wrong. Ultimately the mission of the prophets was to turn things the right-way up, even if it made people uncomfortable. The goal of Christian Aid remains to help people speak up for their rights and lift themselves out of poverty. The almighty power of ordinary people can change the world.

By the use of ordinary talents, ordinary skills, everyday, ordinary people can and do change the world. People like Tabitha, or Dorcas, in the stories of the early Church told by Luke in the Book of Acts. We know so little about her other than she may have been a woman of some substance but that she spent so much of her time helping others. Little acts of charity. She made clothes and helped the poor. She is the only woman in the New Testament given the title 'disciple'. She clearly was a pillar of the local church.

We don't hear about her faith commitment. We don't hear how she became a follower of Jesus. But we hear she was devoted to good works and charity. Dorcas was a beloved saint. Her ministry was apparently to serve among the widows, making them clothes, and supporting them with her love and devotion.

Dorcas in C21st Morningside would be on the car rota. Dorcas would help out at the Wednesday coffee morning, and the Sunday coffees. Dorcas would be on the flower rota. Dorcas would be on the church visitors group. Dorcas would help with one of the uniformed organisations. Dorcas would help at the Royal Edinburgh Hospital, and the Open Door, and the Eric Liddell Centre. Dorcas would be on a stall at the Christian Aid coffee morning. If she did all that I suppose some would find Dorcas quite annoying! Too filled with heaven to be of any earthly use. All that devotion to good works and acts of charity. And yet we all know the women, and the men, whose lives are measured out in cups of coffee and a baked cake; a garden tidied or some handiwork at home attended to; a lift to Church or to a hospital appointment. These are the saints of today without home churches like ours simply would not function. In my year of travelling for the Church, I was often asked if I could highlight good practice in different churches and charities that I visited. One of the problems of trying to identify a media case study of a thriving church doing really good community works is there are too many to choose from. And, so long as we are not tempted to rest on our laurels, we would be one of them. We take for granted at our peril the astonishing amount of good work and acts of charity that are done in and around our Church by the saints of our congregation.

People who think that they are quite ordinary and unexceptional, but in reality are the salt of the earth, and who use, with imagination and kindness, those ordinary talents to make our world a better place.

Most of you will be aware that there has been a grim run of bereavements in the last few days. There have been seven. I can't think of a time when I have had so many funerals. George Munro, whose pastoral ministry here was of the highest order. Stan Douglas, of whom his family said, 'he had no acquaintances, only friends', and whose kindness behind the scenes helped

many people. Helen Buist, never far from a tea urn, knitting items for stillborn and prematurely born infants, and using her car as a lifeline of hospitality and kindness for others who depended on her. These are the male and female Dorcas-es whose devotion to good work and acts of charity needs not only to be celebrated and remembered, but also emulated by people of younger generations today.

A concern I have for the Church, and the wider community, is seeing the narrowing of imagination when it comes to acts of charity on a sustained basis. Yes, there are the big events that capture the news headlines – the Children in Need, the Red Nose Day and others. These are great things, but for all their publicity they have made acts of charity almost anonymous. I wonder what will happen to the little acts of charity that depend on a regular commitment by ordinary people. The rotas that will go empty because people have retreated into a smaller world that has little connection to the surrounding community.

This is not meant to sound critical, but I wonder what churches like ours will do when the senior generations are no longer here to keep things going, because others are too busy on school runs, mortgage-paying jobs with back-breaking hours, nuclear-family dominated activities that don't often include community commitment, weekend sports and leisure activities and so on. God will not leave God's church without people, and it may be that what we are living through is a change of emphasis and involvement, but it will come at a price and it would be a pity to see it disappear by default.

Last week some of us visited Greyfriars Church in the heart of Edinburgh. A grade A listed building, surrounded by a famous cemetery. A church with a smaller congregation than ours, but one which has over the last fifteen or so years had to reinvent itself with imagination and with commitment and with a reshaping of how they see themselves in that community. They took their pews out, but worship remains core to what they do. They engaged with the community around them, the down-and-outs in the Grassmarket, the neighbouring school, the university, and the professional organisations and groups around them to host events. They use their sanctuary in a variety of ways that are a reminder of what medieval churches once were,

hubs for their communities where people gathered for many different reasons, one of which was worship.

I like that. That challenges me, but I like it because it takes the idea of sanctuary and uses it with imagination, and compassion to make a connection with the world. A bridge to the community. A longer table, around which many people perhaps to their surprise and ours, find a place. A place for the C21st Dorcas, or George, or Stan, or Helen, do devote themselves to good works and acts of charity, and thereby transform worlds. This world. Our world. Now.

The congregation at Joppa, where Dorcas was a member, was vulnerable. They stood together, using all the tools and spiritual resources available to them – weeping together, hoping together, and celebrating together. They were unafraid to wade into each other's lives and communities in transforming ways. Doing things differently, embracing the present, and the future.

“The future of the Church will not simply be a replication of the past and it is time for vital, new expressions of just and generous Christian faith to emerge.” That's what Dorcas engage in. Will we?

**In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit**

**Amen**