

Hunger and Thirst

Psalm 51:1-12; John 6:24-35

You would need a heart of stone not to be moved by the television adverts being run by the UNICEF charity now.

80% of Yemen's population need humanitarian aid and protection. Over 12 million children in Yemen are under threat of starvation, and now coronavirus adds a further threat. Yemen faces a major humanitarian crisis. A devastating conflict has left children and families in urgent need of food, water, and medical supplies. More than five years of fighting have already pushed Yemen and its health system to the brink of collapse. Only one in three people have access to running water. Malnutrition is at an all-time high. 2 million children are acutely malnourished and over 325,000 under 5 are suffering from severe acute malnutrition. £11 would provide enough food for a child for a week. Currently 1.71 million children are internally displaced. Wars are fought by adults, but it is so often the children who suffer. No place in Yemen is safe for children.

Some might find themselves screaming at God for the starving child, until we see that the starving child is God screaming at us.

Nearer to home Foodbanks have never been busier. Covid has dealt devastating health blows to many people, but as our country emerges tentatively from lockdown many are finding their job future is insecure or has vanished altogether. I don't think any of us realised how many individuals, and how many businesses, had been managing on shoe-string budgets for years. Enough to get by in the good times, but with no reserves when lockdown came.

Care support worker, Donna, saw her life turned upside down when she was hospitalised after suffering from two mini-strokes. Forced to stop working and not eligible for sick pay, the 44-year-old, mother-of-three from Northern Ireland soon began to struggle. "I was always pretty good on managing and saving. But from not working, the savings were getting very low," she admits. "Things had to be paid for and I didn't want the kids to suffer. We had some food in the cupboard and freezer, but I knew it was starting to get lower and lower. I wasn't doing what I should have been doing as a mother." Donna knew she had to ask for help. "It was either asking somebody

for a lend with money and having that debt and struggle or going to the food bank. So, I decided I would opt for the food bank.” Although Donna was nervous about going to the food bank, she was thankful they were able to support her through this difficult time. “I sat in the car park for about ten minutes getting the courage to go in, but the welcome that I got through the doors was just phenomenal,” she admits. “I felt so at ease. They listened and offered me tea. It was so nice and family-based.” As well as providing Donna with food for herself and her children, the food bank was also able to give her information on benefit support she was entitled to claiming, to get further help. Donna told us: “I left the food bank with my bags of food and felt very overwhelmed. I was so glad I had come here.”

Hunger and thirst. It sounds as if it comes from a different time, and far away, but it is right here and now. Food and drink, the need of these, and the sharing of these, plays a significant part in the ministry of Jesus. The passage from John’s Gospel follows on from His feeding of the 5,000 in the wilderness. But Jesus is not slow in pointing out that the feeding miracle was not an end in itself. It was a sign pointing to faith in the living God Who provides, through His followers, not only for the immediate needs of the hungry and the thirsty but provides for other needs that class as hunger and thirst.

Our Church has a strong tradition in doing this, as do many faith communities. In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus tells His followers, “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied.” Of course, we are called to meet the physical needs of those around us, but Jesus makes it clear in John’s Gospel that He comes not only to meet the immediate needs, food, and drink, but also things that are more existential, the hunger for hope, for peace, for love, and the thirst for justice, for well-being, for connection. Hunger and thirst, in the ministry of Jesus, addresses those existential questions. Questions about our meaning, questions about our purpose. When Jesus talks about hunger and thirst, and how these things are to be met, He is also asking us to ask ourselves, “What am I living *for?*”

I participated in a conference last week looking at the issues of loneliness and isolation. Speakers from around the world talked about lessons to be learned from the pandemic about our communities. The fact that we, and our Governments, have confused physical distancing (which

is what causes the spread of the virus) with social distancing, which is what underlined existing conditions of loneliness and separation from community. We learned that if we are to rebuild social solidarity, we have to maintain and support physical places where people can get together – libraries, parks, playing fields – places which successive Governments have cut from budgets and building into communities’ dislocation. We learned that loneliness has implications for personal, economic, and societal wellbeing. We learned that we cannot solve loneliness and social isolation problems one lonely person at a time. It’s going to take a new kind of village. It’s going to take a recalibration of an old kind of Church. Amongst the many unique selling points of the Church is that at its best it provides times to gather and sing together; times to gather and drink coffee and tea together; times to gather and learn and laugh together; times to gather and address struggles and find support together. The Church provides a place for people to connect. And in that connection, we find meaning and purpose, not only by meeting our needs, but by our providing for the needs of others.

We address contemporary issues of hunger and thirst. Physical, emotional, societal, and spiritual. I want you, no, let’s lift it way beyond that, God wants you, Jesus wants you, to share with the people in your social circle, the people in your families, the people on your street, the people in your community, the good news that this is what we aim to provide. A warm, welcoming, inclusive, generous, not perfect but always aspiring community of women and men who are doing their best to make a difference.

Maybe it will be supporting UNICEF in Yemen. Maybe it will be supporting our local Foodbank. Maybe it will be joining rotas to read, or make coffee, or arrange flowers, or help in the Clothing Store, or support our Baby and Toddler Groups, or sing in the choir, or attend a study group, or pray, or support the church financially. Or where you live, those who were isolated during the pandemic were isolated before the pandemic and will likely be isolated after the pandemic. Will you be the one reaching out to them again, or for the first time?

Hunger and thirst. We live in a world that will always be hungry and thirsty. We know a Jesus Who will address that hunger and thirst. And that Jesus knows people like us who will help Him

in the constant challenge, and the constant privilege, to do even the little we can do help. There are hungry and thirsty people out there. Let's help God to meet their needs.

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

Amen