

‘Come over and help us’

Wilson Poon, *St. Peter’s, Luton Place, Edinburgh, 9th May 2010 (Christian Aid Sunday)*

Texts: Acts 16:9-15; Revelation 21:10, 22-22:5; John 14:23-19

Yesterday was the 65 anniversary of VE day, when we celebrated and remembered the end of the Second World War in Europe. I guess two words were uppermost in people’s minds on that day 65 years ago: ‘victory’ and ‘peace’. But celebration on 8th May 1945 quickly gave way to realism – realism about the magnitude of the task of reconstruction throughout the continent. Everyone realised *this* time something that they did not at the end of the First World War, that real peace requires reconciliation between peoples and a just distribution of resources amongst all peoples on the continent. This is the kind of peace that the Jewish prophets talked about. Their word was *shalom* – which we may translate as ‘wholeness’. Jesus stood in this tradition – my *shalom* I leave with you, he said to his disciples in our Gospel reading. He left them the wholeness that he brought to countless number of people during his earthly sojourn.

65 years ago went a 43 year old British woman went to war-torn Germany to bring some of this *shalom*. She was sent as YMCA education secretary for British troops of the Rhine. This Christian woman had already seen striking poverty at first hand in her early twenties amongst miners in the 1926 general strike. But nothing prepared her for the devastation she saw now. She was determined not to be reconciled to degradation and brokenness all around her. As she went about her daily tasks, she kept whispering to herself, ‘I must not get used to this devastation.’ She used her post with the YMCA to encourage British soldiers to meet with German youths and refugees. For she realised that it genuine peace had to be built upon such person-to-person reconciliation.

This lady was not the only Christian to feel called to European reconstruction. In fact, Christians in Britain responded as a whole by setting up an organisation known as ‘Christian Reconstruction in Europe’. This organisation later changed its name to *Interchurch Aid*, to recognise the fact that it worked on behalf of all British churches, and became, appropriately, a part of the British Council of Churches. The YMCA lady became its president in 1952, and stayed in the post until she retired in 1968. Her name was Janet Lacey.

By 1952, Janet’s horizons had moved beyond Europe. She realised that there was no such thing as a ‘local’ peace, in the ‘shalom’ sense of the word ‘peace’. It was either peace for the whole world, or no peace at all. So she led *Interchurch Aid* to look beyond Europe to the rest of the world, and started working with refugees in Africa and Asia. To highlight the plight of displaced peoples, Janet organised what she called ‘Christian Aid Week’ for the first time in 1957, building a replica refugee camp at the Church of St. Martin’s in the Fields in London. Seven years later, on the back of the success of Christian Aid Week, *Interchurch Aid* changed its name to *Christian Aid*.

Apart from alleviating poverty worldwide, the organisation also work at home to change the underlying causes of poverty: injustice. Indeed, they repeatedly took courageous decisions to lead in political engagement. Back in the 1980s, *Christian Aid* drove the creation of the *Southern Africa Coalition*, which lobbied the British Government to help end apartheid. This may seem mild today. Back then, it a controversial move. But they

were right, and they made a real difference, on our behalf, because *Christian Aid* is *our* organisation, and works in the name of all the churches in Britain, in the name of you and me.

Christian Aid started half a century ago because one woman heard the cry for help from the poor outside her own comfort zone of a booming post-war Europe. Two millennia ago, the roles were reversed: Paul heard the cry for help from a Macedonian, a European, in his dream:

During the night Paul had a vision: there stood a man of Macedonia pleading with him and saying, 'Come over to Macedonia and help us.' (Acts 16:9)

Up until then, Paul's intention was to stay within Asia Minor, which he had already visited on his first missionary journey. Asia Minor was, you may say, Paul's comfort zone. But God was determined to take him out of that comfort zone. Just before our Acts reading today, we read this:

They went through the region of Phrygia and Galatia, having been forbidden by the Holy Spirit to speak the word in Asia. When they had come opposite Mysia, they attempted to go into Bithynia, but the Spirit of Jesus did not allow them; so passing by Mysia, they went down to Troas. (Acts 16:6-8)

It was at Troas that Paul heard the cry for help from the Macedonian in his dream. We don't know how he recognised that the person in his dream was from Macedonia – one of the provinces of the Roman Europe, in modern day Greece. Perhaps it was because Troas on the edge of Asia, where it faces Europe across the Bosphorus. Here, Paul would have met large numbers of Europeans for the first time. You can imagine what happened. After a day of strange sounds and sights, Paul saw one of those foreign faces in his dreams, and heard a voice from beyond his comfort zone. God twice stood in Paul's way in order to bring him to this place of encounter with sights and sounds beyond what he had known. Here, Paul heard the cry for help from beyond his comfort zone. He attended to this cry for help, and brought the Gospel to a new continent. We here today are among the beneficiaries.

But it could all have ended before it had really got going. Paul was ignominiously expelled from one Macedonian city after another – Philippi, Thessalonica, and then Beroea. After a short stay in Athens, where Paul made few converts, he left the province of Macedonia all together, and arrived in Corinth. Paul recalled his own frame of mind at this point later when he wrote to the Corinthians:

I came to you in weakness and in fear and in much trembling. (1 Cor. 2:3)

Had it all been a bad mistake? Should he not have been distracted by that cry for help in his dream and stayed in his comfort zone in Asia after all?

Janet Lacey heard the cry for help from the poor of Africa and Asia in the 1950s, and took British Churches of her time out of their comfort zone of Europe. It was not plain sailing for her either. Plenty of people repeatedly told her, and her successors, that *Christian Aid* had got it wrong. Christian social and political action on behalf of the world's poor irrespective of their creed, was, and is, way outside the comfort zone for

many, including, I guess, for some of us here today. We prefer to leave the Gospel within a comfortable 'spiritual realm'. But the Christian message, if we hear it right, insistently takes us out of such a 'spiritualised' comfort zone. Jesus was crucified 'King of the Jews', and that was not a one-off.

Look at Paul in Macedonia. Why was he repeatedly kicked out of its cities? Listen to the complaint about him and his companions in Thessalonica:

These people who have been turning the world upside down have come here also ... They are all acting contrary to the decrees of the emperor, saying that there is another king named Jesus. (Acts 17:6-7)

Paul's enemies were right. The Christian message was understood to be deeply political by its first listeners. It said that Jesus, not Caesar, was Lord; it proclaimed that all humans, men and women, master and slave, were all equal in God's sight; its followers took private property lightly, sharing their possessions in common; some even started spurning extra-marital affairs! If *this* stuff were to spread, it would indeed 'turn the world upside down' and topple the existing socio-political order! Paul ultimately lost his head for spreading this dynamite.

John, the writer of the book of Revelation, paid a lesser price – he was only exiled to the Island of Patmos.) From there, he wrote a tract to his persecuted brothers and sisters that was no less explosive than Paul's sermons a few decades earlier. Against the death-dealing power of the Roman Empire, John's vision affirms God's sovereignty over human history and destiny in the most colourful terms. It's a kind of 'tract for VW day' – victory over the world! Y

ou only have to read Chapter 18 to see why this was explosive stuff: 'Fallen, fallen is Babylon the great!' (Revelation 18:2). John took care to explain that 'Babylon' was 'the great city that rules over the kings of the earth.' (Revelation 17:18) The allusion to Rome cannot be clearer. In the same chapter, we read of the fall of the commercial interests allied with political power:

And the merchants of the earth weep and mourn [for the great city], since no one buys their cargo any more. (Revelation 18:11)

There follows a description of the goods that these merchants trade in – a long list of luxury items and military equipment, ending, chillingly, in the trade in 'human bodies and souls' (Revelation 18:12, NRSV footnote) Indeed, John's description of Babylon and her merchants has an uncanny resemblance to what *Christian Aid* says it exists to fight against!

After describing the fall of Babylon, John ends his tract by giving us a vision of the New Jerusalem (Revelation 21-22). We heard part of his description just now, where he tells us that in the middle of this heavenly city is a life-giving river, available to all, and:

On either side of the river is the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit, producing its fruit each month; and the leaves of the tree and for the healing of the nations. (22:2)

On this *Christian Aid* Sunday, we are challenged to hear John's picture not as a vision exclusively of the future, but as a vision for the present also. Janet Lacey and others like her hear John's affirmation that the death-dealing powers of this world do not, and cannot, have the last word, because in God, another world is possible, and that this world has already been inaugurated by the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Indeed, if only we have eyes to see, then we can already perceive those healing leaves from God. The *Christian Aid* web site is full of examples:

- When a pregnant mother in Congo is protected from malaria because her husband watched an educational video and installed a mosquito net above their bed, the eyes of faith sees that as a healing leaf.
- When thousands of people in a slum in Nairobi can, for the first time in their lives, have regular showers in a new sanitation block, the eyes of faith sees that as a healing leaf.
- When local people in a Bolivian village fought and won the right to a clean water supply, the eyes of faith sees that as a healing leaf.

And we can do our own bit to turn the world upside down by spreading those healing leaves. It will involve each one of us hearing a cry for help that takes us out of our comfort zone. If giving money to *Christian Aid* takes you out of your comfort zone, then please give some money – it is *our* charity after all. If giving money to *Christian Aid* does not take you out of your comfort zone, well, give some money anyway, but do something else. Listen out for that 'cry for help' that God wants you to hear this year. For me, I think it is the cry of African countries facing ruin because of their HIV-infected populations. I am going to join *Christian Aid* in pushing pharmaceutical giants to make cheap anti-HIV drugs available. For you, the cry for help may come from somewhere else, maybe even on the streets of Newington. But hearing such a cry will involve getting out of our comfort zone to bring *shalom* to someone, somewhere, in the full confidence that in heaven, VW day has already been celebrated: our God has, and will have, the victory.

Let us pray. Lord Jesus, you have vanquished the death-dealing powers of the world by your death and resurrection. Open our ears to hear the cry for help of those who do not yet know your victory, and send us to bring peace, the peace that you left with us when you departed. Amen.

An inspiring closing sermon at the 9th Assembly of the World Council of Churches on Revelation 22:1-5 (published in *The Ecumenical Review*, Jan-April 2006) is available free from the following site:

http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m2065/is_12_58/ai_n17134191/?tag=content;coll

I have borrowed significantly from this sermon in the second half of my own sermon above.