

## Christian Aid Week sermon

A couple of weeks ago, I had a letter from a friend in Sri Lanka reflecting on the current global crisis. Had anyone noticed, he asked, how odd it was that we should be talking so much about ‘social distancing’ in a world where various kinds of ‘social distance’ were built in to the way societies were organised? The life we have regarded as normal is in fact a life in which there are deep chasms of separation between those who have the resources to manage their lives with a degree of freedom and control and those who don’t. In many contexts – and not only in the developing world – you can find communities living literally side by side, but with this immense gap between them.

One of the most dramatic aspects of the pandemic we are living through is that these familiar kinds of social distance don’t help much: sickness does not discriminate between rich and poor, and we are all suddenly reminded of the limits of our freedom and our control of the world we live in. And yet even in this situation, we can’t help being uncomfortably aware that the level of risk varies. We think with gratitude and admiration of all those who are daily exposed to high levels of risk – health and care workers of course, but also shelf stackers and rubbish collectors; and we think too of those for whom lockdown restrictions mean the risk of abuse, or pressure on a fragile mental health condition, or simply the growing demands of caring for others in the home.

This week we’re invited to cast our eyes wider still: to remember those across the world with the least resources to respond effectively to the pandemic. Our Christian Aid partners in Africa are facing challenges we can scarcely begin to guess at: communities living in impossibly overcrowded conditions, communities with no safe water for washing or drinking, communities where you can’t rely on consistent public health provision of any kind. As the pandemic takes a tighter hold in such environments, the economy of entire countries begins to unravel, far more dramatically even than the painful economic effects of the disease here in the UK and Ireland. Part of the ‘social distance’ we have tolerated in our world is the reality that the securities we take for granted, even in times of crisis – health care, pensions, unemployment benefits – are lacking in so many societies.

So even as we observe the social distance we need to keep each other safe in our households and neighbourhoods here, we might think about how we are called to step across another kind of social distance, so as to stand alongside those who are so much more at risk. In the story of the Good Samaritan, we have the picture of a person who crosses more than one gulf of distance to bring life and hope to someone whose life is at risk. He must stop on a lonely road where danger may still be lurking. He must take time and pay attention, putting aside his own preoccupations and worries so as to see carefully and intelligently what needs doing. And, not least, he must *distance* himself from his own prejudice and hostility towards a stranger - a man who would be likely in other circumstances to see him as a contemptible and dangerous enemy. He steps across the distance by putting a distance between his perception of someone’s suffering on the one hand, and the familiar human mixture of self-preserving

instinct and inherited fears and hatreds on the other. The Samaritan's act in saving the life of his Jewish neighbour is a sign of what a world might look like in which the distance created by fear, ignorance and bigotry had been abolished; a world where we were free to respond to one another's needs with prompt and deliberate action.

Another name for such a world is the Kingdom of God. We are not going to bring it about by policies and programmes, certainly; but we need constantly to be finding ways of letting its reality show through, so as to challenge the 'social distances' we so easily take for granted. In a rather strange way, we are learning something about this through the conditions we're currently living with. We are learning to put on hold a lot of our instincts for the reassuring pleasures of company and entertainment; learning to pay attention to our physical habits in a new way, becoming aware of the literal distance between us when we shop or take exercise, remembering to wash our hands and so on; and we're also learning the crucial importance of so many unromantic jobs in public service without which we'd be lost – the jobs done with the selfless professional concentration that provides us with a steady backdrop to all our anxieties and uncertainties. Whether it's a health service professional routinely staffing the intensive care unit, or just someone stepping aside on a footpath to allow another to go past at the right distance, we are recognising that living *thoughtfully* – mindfully, if you like – rather than just letting our own comfort and convenience dictate everything is something life-giving.

We are still in the Easter season, celebrating the central fact of our faith. The God we worship has abolished the distance between heaven and earth, manifesting the glory of divine life at the very heart of human failure and pain in the cross of Jesus Christ. The God we worship gives us the power and freedom to step away from the prison of our self-preoccupation; to confront with joy and thanksgiving God's own radiant beauty, and to confront with honesty and love the urgent needs of God's creation. Jesus in his life and his death *distances* himself from safety and self-obsession; his life is a journey towards a deeper and deeper solidarity with human beings in their pain and guilt and helplessness. And in that journey to the heart of our darkness, he renews the whole human race and creates a new level of connection and compassion between human beings.

So the painful days we are experiencing at the moment give us a chance to think again about the way in which we fail to notice just how far we have slipped away from each other in our global society, and indeed in our own country too; to see how we have lost sight of the promise of the great events of Good Friday and Easter – not to mention the vision of Pentecost, the coming of the Holy Spirit who brings the gift of understanding between diverse languages and cultures. We have come to think that distance is normal, the distance between rich and poor, powerful and powerless; and we've not found the energy we need to challenge this.

As our own society faces great challenges in the shrinking of its economy, these things will be of immediate concern to all of us – but most of all to those in insecure jobs, those without work, the elderly and disabled and homeless. Likewise on the world stage, we shall all be affected by the burdens that will fall on the poorest and least protected nations. One thing we

should have worked out in the light of the crisis is that, in our tightly interconnected and mobile world, no problem is *only* local; disaster and disruption anywhere rapidly become an issue on our doorsteps. As many have said, our best hope as a world community for avoiding another lethal pandemic, perhaps even worse than this one, is to urge the creation of effective health care in every country and of rapid and efficient international vehicles for response to medical emergency. It means no longer tolerating the deadly inequalities that condemn so many to dangerous exposure to sickness and hopelessness.

In our enforced social distancing, we have the opportunity to reflect on how we learn to live more consistently in and by the grace of the God who abolishes distance, who breaks down the walls of separation and loves us one family. God help us to rise to this challenge and learn to love as he loves us, with a love that never fails in its willingness to cross over, like the Good Samaritan, to wherever there is suffering and fear, leaving behind the narrowness that we have let ourselves get used to. Love never fails; don't let us fail the call and opportunity that love gives us.