

John 10:1-10 Christian Aid week 2011 (Acts 2:42-47)

Start:

1 billion people live in extreme poverty.

What does that look like? It means 1 billion people live on less than one dollar a day. That's less than 61p a day.

That's less than £223 per year – the UK average salary is £26,000 per year, just over £71 per day.

1 billion people live on less than 61p per day.

If you started now and counted to 1 billion it would take you 32 years!

What can you do?

Maybe nothing on your own, but as part of a large group serving God you could make a big difference, like this:

Watch video

Sing

TALK

Christians are transformers because Christ is a transformer.

Now, the moment I mentioned “transformers” the technical amongst you will instantly have thought about valves and circuits whilst the young – and maybe the young at heart – will have instantly imagined cars or aeroplanes “transforming” into giant robots as in the big budget movies of today, or the low budget cartoons of (at least) my childhood.

Well, don't worry, none of you are that far out because both those images are of something becoming or transforming into something better, more practical, more productive and essentially that's what Jesus does to us, but it doesn't stop with us, Jesus then calls us to be part of transforming others too.

The media and the world like to give the impression that Christianity is old fashioned and stale, it something that has been and gone, its over and done with. But that is a misrepresentation and certainly not one that we should believe because in contrast to a bubble which has burst Christianity is all about the ever growing kingdom of God as lives upon lives upon lives are transformed by Jesus.

In Jesus God burst into our world – in to his world – and through Jesus God revealed to us who he is. He showed us how through his death and resurrection sinful human being could be transformed from condemned rebels into forgiven sons and daughters. But we know that it doesn't stop there, as we read the Bible we see that God's big plan is to transform this whole broken and sinful world; to remake it, to renew it and in the new creation dwell with his forgiven people for ever.

If that isn't a glorious ongoing and growing phenomenon of cosmic and eternal importance, I don't know what is! But at the moment we're not there; the world is not perfect, we might be saved, but we still live in a fallen world surrounded by fallen people and fallen people often manipulate others to their own ends.

In our Gospel reading Jesus talks about those who have tried to enter the sheep pen by climbing over the fence – they are thieves and robbers, out to steal sheep for their own end. It is a direct reference to Ezekiel 34 where God condemns the religious leaders for treating his people with contempt; exploiting them for their own gain.

Religion for glorification of the human priest is of no value to anyone, it is simply an example of useless religion and of wasted time.

But in contrast Jesus declares himself to be the good shepherd, the one who legitimately comes in through the gate – the watchman opens it for him and Jesus calls his sheep out. They know him, they trust him, they follow him.

And what is it that Jesus promises? It is to lead his sheep to new pastures; a new kingdom, ultimately, a new creation and he does that (he says in verse 9,) to “save” them and so that they might “have life and have it to the full.” Under Jesus’ transforming authority the sheep flourish and enjoy life as life should be.

Now, again, I just want to remind us that I am not saying (and Jesus certainly is not saying) that if we trust him, if we declare him to be our Lord and Saviour then everything will be fine and dandy; no worries, no illness, no poverty – life to the full as the glossy Sunday magazines portray it.

No, life as it should be is not all about Lamborghinis and McQueen dresses, Chanel and Harrods. Life as it should be is about knowing God, looking ahead to the new heavens and the new earth when everything will be fully transformed, but at the same time, life as it should be includes living in freedom, with dignity, having access to food, water, education, healthcare – things we take for granted.

If we hear the voice of the good shepherd calling us and we follow then our hearts and our minds should be transformed. We should recognise that although this world and this life is never going to be perfect this side of Christ’s return that is no excuse for apathy, we should want to be part of God’s plan of transforming the lives of other people.

To ignore global needs is to live in an unChristlike manner because Jesus always cared for those living lives which were less than they should be.

So, Jesus has transformed us and he calls us to transform this world more and more into the likeness of the kingdom of heaven in preparation for the Day of Judgement and the New Creation. That means that we are to work for a world of justice, righteousness, mercy, compassion and grace; a place where life can be lived to the full – as it should be.

That is why it is so good to partner with Christian Aid. We know that by putting a £10 note into a red envelope we aren't going to solve all the worlds problems, we perhaps even aren't going to directly convert someone to a living faith in Christianity (that's why we support mission agencies as well as aid agencies) but what we are doing is transforming communities with the love of Christ because Jesus didn't just come on a teaching mission, he came on the greatest sacrificial mercy mission of compassion the world has ever seen.

We needed Jesus to do both;

Just a teacher? It would have been a very cold, clinical and academic faith that we were called to have.

Just a healer? How would we have known who God is and how he wants us to live and even how to be saved?

No, Jesus was both and calls us to share both ministries of teaching and compassion.

So being a Christian isn't just about listening to great preaching (although we need to do that), it isn't just about heartfelt worship – I'm talking about singing and praying together, although I hope that's what we long for.

Being a Christian means being transformed in to the likeness of Christ, thinking like him, speaking like him, behaving like him and when we give to Christian Aid and collect envelopes on their behalf, we are taking part in a ministry of global transformation in his service.

You see, you and I can't just up sticks and head off to Nicaragua, well perhaps one or two of us could, but certainly not all of us. We couldn't physically transform communities over there by ourselves; we don't have the technical or cultural know how. But your money and the money you collect can when it is channelled through Aid agencies. And as Christians it is good to use people like Christian Aid because we know that we share their motivation and their ethos.

Christian Aid works to help people help themselves out of the kind of grinding poverty which cripples individuals and communities. Let me give you an example.

Gustavo Adolfo Talavera is a coffee farmer and community leader in Jinotega, Nicaragua. He is one of the founding members of a cooperative which has been selling coffee through Christian Aid partner Soppexcca (pronounced so-pecks-ka) for over 12 years.

He says:

"I don't know how to read or write and I did not want my children to be like me. I did not have the opportunity to go to school, so I tell my children to study and do what I couldn't."

But there was no school in the village so school lessons were held in Gustavo's front yard with the children sitting on the ground. When it rained, that meant that they got soaking wet. This went on for years, but then Soppexcca, funded by your efforts in Christian Aid Week, came along.

It gave the community a better price for their coffee, it helped them improve the quality of what they were producing and, crucially, pooled their efforts as a community to start building a school. That was nine years ago.

So the farmers started producing high-quality coffee and began receiving a higher price for their coffee beans. Their quality of life improved and an end to poverty came into sight. They ploughed their profits back into their own community and not only managed to build the school Gustavo dreamt of, but a health centre as well.

Now the children in Gustavo's community are looking at a future where poverty doesn't define their lives. For example, Gustavo's daughter and other young people in his community now go to university, and his niece Martha is being trained in the Soppexcca youth-movement programme. She is taught to protect the environment, to learn new skills, to take control of her future and to be part of a community working its own way out of poverty.

Now don't you like a good story like that? And it's not the only one, Christian Aid is at work all over the world putting our faith into action transforming lives to the glory of God, lifting people out of poverty.

The church in Acts – as we saw last year – was a compassionate, caring church, but all too often in our 21<sup>st</sup> century western society we can lose that as we live out our lives in our little houses, spread out in our diverse communities which often lack much community anyway, separated from our families by distance, separated from our neighbours by our TVs and separated from our colleagues by our computers.

It isn't a substitute, but at least partnering with Christian Aid reminds us of the need to work to transform lives and perhaps as we do that thousands of miles away, we will also look for those nearer to home who are not living life as God intended it to be, life to full in the love and grace and compassionate love of the Good Shepherd.

“All the believers were together and had everything in common. Selling their possessions and goods, they gave to anyone as he had need. Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favour of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.”

That's a transforming church – can we do that too?