

I am recording this message in Christian Aid Week, one of those important reminders of the needs of others as well as of the blessings we enjoy and too often take for granted.

Turning our eyes to encounter the wider world, its material and spiritual needs, sets a context for our own situation.

The video for this Christian Aid Week films a widow having to walk 8 kilometres to collect water for her family, bringing home the struggle many face in the world just to survive from one day to the next.

That struggle was highlighted last week, when we celebrated the 75th anniversary of VE Day, but at the same time remained conscious of the terrible wars and conflicts that still rage around the world. Yemen and Syria continue to be forgotten.

Awareness of the suffering of others should never be far from our screens or phones or iPads, like the impending devastation of a repeat and increased plague of locusts and fresh flooding in parts of Africa, destroying livelihoods and any sense of hope.

Similarly the current coronavirus pandemic afflicting almost all parts of the world tells another story of suffering and anguish and fear. And while there may be an easing of the lock down here in the U.K., the tragedy is yet to hit other places, where they are without the resources and facilities to respond to the cries for help and intervention.

And for those of us who are Christians there's the added pain of hearing of the persecution of our brothers and sisters. Just this week another village in Nigeria has been raided, causing death, destruction and displacement. Archbishop Ben Kwashi writes in his book 'neither bomb nor bullet', published last year, that 'whatever the gunman do, when the suicide bombers do their worst, God's message will always be, I love you, I have given my Son for you. Turn to Him and live'.

Parts of the Christian family live each day with that uncertainty and fear of what may happen next, simply because they identify as followers of Jesus and will not renounce their faith or deny knowing Him.

That's the real world we are living in. It's the backdrop and context which gives us a perspective on our own personal and national situation, and especially in this time of crisis. What are we learning about the new normal that will emerge from this time? Are we open to learning a new way of thinking and living? Or will we fall into the trap of thinking that we must return to how things were? Have we turned to Him, that we might live?

Let me offer a few suggestions:

I think we are learning to be thankful for the gift of life. Too easily we have presumed we are in control of everything. This pandemic should be teaching us to value each day as a gift. None of us knows what tomorrow will bring.

We are learning to value others for what they do at risk of their own lives. The change from the abuse and rudeness NHS staff had regularly experienced to now a weekly clap of appreciation is a welcome new respect for those dedicated to the wellbeing and care of others.

We are learning to give of our resources for the good of others. We all love and appreciate Colonel Tom Moore's heartwarming story. I hope and pray that this year's Christian Aid Week without the usual door to door collection will not suffer. Similarly, how good it would be if the anticipated drop in income for charities did not occur and that generosity has supported the ongoing valuable work among those in greatest need.

For Christians there is the added learning about support and prayer for the proclamation of the Gospel to those who have yet to hear of and respond to Jesus, catching a vision for that great commission He gave before His ascension:

'Go and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit and teaching them all that I have commanded you'. Nothing could be clearer than His directive for what we as Christian disciples are to be about. Here's our purpose as His followers.

Now is a time of grief and anxiety for many, unexpected bereavements, unwanted separations and isolations, and unplanned changes to income, so pastoral care and support must be clearly evident. But it is also a time of openness for many to hear and learn what life here is meant to be for, what are the priorities and what are the non essentials, or to use the phrase from the prophet Micah, what it is that the Lord requires of us.

A final comment for our learning about the new normal came to me from one of the Morning Prayer readings this week from Numbers 9.15 - 23, where God was leading His People through the wilderness, expressed in that refrain, 'You lead the people whom You have redeemed'. Whenever the cloud of the presence of God settled over the ark of the covenant, they remained in the camp. Whenever it lifted they set out.

Vs 23: At the Lord's command they encamped and at the Lord's command they set out.

This prompts me to ask whether we have learned to let Him lead. May I encourage us to learn to hear the Spirit's prompting and be obedient to His calling. That means making time and space to stop and hear His still small voice, to read the Scriptures and discern their message for today, for us, for

me. Even in a lock down in the rush and busyness of each day, it can be too easy not to wait for His instructions. Sometimes we can charge ahead, sometimes we can lag behind. It is crucial to keep in step with Him in our daily walk and in our work as Christian Communities. As the lock down is gradually eased we need to think through what we have learnt and what must change to create a new and better normal for us as a diocese and more widely for our country and the world. Let's not be afraid to learn what He wants to teach.