



**A sermon for Choral Evensong celebrating Christian Aid at Wells Cathedral, preached on Sunday 17 May by the Right Reverend Prebendary Bosco MacDonald, Roman Catholic Bishop of Clifton**

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My brothers and sisters in Christ, first of all, thank you to the Dean and Chapter of Wells Cathedral for the kindness of this invitation and for the generosity of your welcome. For a Roman Catholic bishop, preaching at Anglican Evensong in Wells Cathedral feels rather like being invited into somebody else's magnificent family home and being trusted not to spill the tea on the antique furniture.

What a place this is. Some churches are beautiful. Some are historically important. A very few somehow seem already half turned towards heaven. Wells Cathedral belongs in that last category. These stones have absorbed centuries of psalms, griefs, thanksgivings and whispered hopes.

Standing here as a Catholic bishop in this great Anglican cathedral, I am conscious that our divided history lives in our stones, our memories, our habits and sometimes our wounds. But I am grateful to be here. Grateful that people from different traditions can still stand together before God, pray together for the poor, and recognise one another as fellow beggars before the mercy of Christ.

Ours is not an easy age in which to be human. Wars grind on. Public life can feel like theatre performed by exhausted people out of ideas shouting at other exhausted people out of ideas. Economic anxiety presses heavily upon many families. We are more connected than any generation in history, and yet loneliness has become almost epidemic.

But here we are, singing ancient psalms in a cathedral older than most political systems on earth, peacefully insisting that God has not abandoned his creation. Evensong is such a gift because it is gloriously predictable and unshowy. The liturgy does its work. It turns our attention away from ourselves and back towards God. And when we begin to look towards God, we start to see one another differently too.

As Christian Aid Week draws to a close, we are reminded that Christian compassion must always be practical as well as prayerful. We have been invited to look with compassion at lives that otherwise could easily be overlooked. Families carrying the daily burden of poverty, uncertainty and insecurity, and yet still refusing to surrender hope. I was especially moved by the stories coming from Nairobi this year. One woman, after the death of her husband, struggled

simply to feed her children and grandson. Through urban farming she slowly rebuilt some stability and dignity for her family. Another spoke with striking simplicity: “When there is a challenge, most of the time, I pray.”

The poor often understand dependence upon God in ways the comfortable can forget. In affluent societies, faith can sometimes be treated as an optional extra. For many people across the world, faith and prayer are not decoration. They are survival. They are hope.

One of the things we should admire about organisations such as Christian Aid, together with other agencies such as CAFOD, is their refusal to accept that people are disposable. They remind us that every person possesses a God-given dignity which poverty cannot erase. St Paul says in the Acts of the Apostles, “*In him we live and move and have our being.*” Every life rests finally in God. Every person is held within the attention of God. In Jesus Christ we see the full dignity of the human person revealed, not as a theory, but in a face.

One of the great spiritual dangers of our age is that we are becoming desensitised. Suffering passes before our eyes constantly. One tragedy replaces another before we have properly absorbed the first. The temptation is either outrage without action, or exhaustion without compassion. The Gospel allows neither. Jesus never treated suffering as background scenery, and the Church must never do so either. He stopped. He looked. He listened. He allowed the cry of the sick, the poor, the grieving and the excluded to interrupt him in his daily life. In a world where we can scroll past another human being’s pain in less than a second, that is already a very demanding Gospel.

Today is also World Communications Day, and that feels especially important as we live through a revolution in communication more profound than most of us yet realise. We are becoming distracted people. Restless people. Attention itself has become fragmented. Artificial intelligence is already changing how people learn, work, relate, decide, imagine and even grieve. The Church must not respond with panic nor with naïve enthusiasm, but with a calm and clear defence of the human person. A soul cannot be automated. Conscience is not software. No artificial intelligence, however sophisticated, will ever replace the mystery of one person freely loving another, or the grace of someone kneeling quietly before God.

This is why prayer, worship and silence matter so much. Evensong is gloriously, stubbornly human. Real voices singing ancient praise together. Real silence. Real presence. Actual people gathered under the gaze of God. In an age of simulation, Christians believe in incarnation. In an age of distraction, we believe in contemplation. In an age of artificial

connection, we believe in communion.

Perhaps this is part of the quiet vocation of the Church in our age: to help people remain fully alive, fully attentive, fully human before God and before one another. Beneath all the noise and confusion of our world, beneath the fears and angers and uncertainties of our age, there remains the discreet, steady faithfulness of God. He has not abandoned this world. He is still planting hope in difficult places. And that hope has a name, a face and a future in Jesus Christ, crucified and risen and ascended to the Father to intercede for us.

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