

St Edmundsbury Cathedral – 4 December 2016

Good morning. Thank you so much for the invitation to be with you today.

I wonder what you and I would have made of John the Baptist? He must have cut a powerful and possibly alarming figure, don't you think, out in the wilderness, living off honey and insects, dressing just like as Elijah the prophet with a hair shirt with a leather belt. He was the herald of the Messiah, exhorting lowly and powerful alike to get ready, prepare the way, to repent and straighten out their relationships with God and each other before the judgement comes and the axe falls on those who refuse to bear fruit.

Now this word repent, *metanoeo* is much more than saying "sorry". It was a call for John's hearers to change their hearts and minds inwardly and, as a consequence, to demonstrate this change outwardly through the visible fruit of words and actions.

"What should we do then?" the crowd asks John in Luke 3. He answered, "Anyone who has two shirts should share with the one who has none, and anyone who has food should do the same." To the tax collectors "Don't collect any more than you are required to,". To the soldiers "Don't extort money and don't accuse people falsely—be content with your pay."

John cuts to the heart of our temptations – the desire to protect what we have rather than to share resources; the temptation to abuse positions of influence to gain advantage, to act and speak in ways which ends up hurting those who are less powerful, rather than treat them fairly. Repent, turn around says John, and to do the right thing. Demonstrate consideration in words and action to those in need and lacking power – in Jesus' words love God and your neighbour as yourself. This will be really good news for others and yourself.

The work of Christian Aid has been part of the church's response to people in need for over 70 years, and on behalf of our partners, we do what to express our deep and heartfelt appreciation for your faithful partnership, generosity in prayer and of resources, your quick response to needs such as the recent Hurricane Matthew. Your support also makes it possible for our partners to maintain their long term work with people so they can make their lives better. So thank you for share your resources, your prayers, challenge injustice and abuse of power through campaigning.

Yesterday I had the privilege of spending the day with Marija Vranesevic who works for the charitable arm of the Orthodox Church in Serbia called Philanthropy. She was in Suffolk and Norfolk meeting supporters to show how UK support has been enabling them to help thousands of refugees who have ended up in Serbia, many

fleeing war in the Middle East. As a result of the donations received Philanthropy are able to provide hot meals, showers, hygiene kits, as well as psychological support for people who have undergone terrible trauma – to show loving compassion through their welcome. In Europe today, such compassion and welcome is rare.

Neighbouring countries have closed their borders and erected razor wire fences, pushing people back and leaving them without adequate clothing or food, often infected with lice and scabies and injured – mostly easily treatable.

Marija has heard and recorded many of the testimonies of these refugees. Desperate stories of people fleeing Syria after having lost family members, vulnerable and illiterate Yazidi women travelling with their children, Afghans, Kurds and Iraqis, each with a story to tell. They are stories of despair, but there is hope because of the compassion shown by the partners. In fact, the Serbian government has been clear: they do not refer to refugees and asylum seekers but to people in need. Language is incredibly important – it can persuade us to welcome or to war, to create friendship or fear.

70 years ago, CA was founded to alleviate the plight of European refugees and displaced people after the end of WW2. In 2015, According to the UN's latest figures, over 65 million people around the world, about the same as the population of UK, have been forced to leave their homes through persecution, violence, threat or human rights violations. They are "forcibly displaced". Most of their stay within their own countries, but 1/3 have had to flee their own country altogether and become refugees, like over 4 million Syrians, most of whom are in neighbouring countries.

This Advent, we are highlighting the situation for these displaced people, and you may have noticed the new displays in the Cathedral. We have been delighted to have been able to work with the 10:10 Group to create these and in preparation for my visit today, with a great deal of support from Cathedral staff for which we are deeply grateful.

There are two themes: "Light the way" and "change the story". Light the way is about showing what has been done already in Christ's name to help displaced people, to celebrate the hope that we can help some, but also to highlight the ongoing need.

We work through partners like Philanthropy with many of these displaced people where they are, whether in Lebanon, Greece, Serbia in the Congo or elsewhere. There is a large map of the world showing all of the countries where Christian Aid's partners are working.

But we also want to change the story. So much of what we hear in the media stokes up fear of the apparent differences between us and the threat that some are supposed to pose.

Alongside stories of refugees there are some compelling and surprising data from a recent UN report, shown as graphics. Did you know that most refugees - 86% - are hosted by developing countries? The top 4 hosts are Turkey, Pakistan and Lebanon, Iran – in Lebanon nearly 1 in 5 of the population are refugees.

We hope these stories and figures will challenge preconceptions, as well as promote discussion and dialogue and greater understanding and compassion and we hope to keep it fresh and updated during Advent.

in the Edmund Chapel there is a large Christmas Card and we would like you and visitors to the Cathedral to sign. We will deliver it to the PM just before Christmas along with 12 or more giant cards from around the country. It calls on our country's leadership to lead in the use of language that shows respect and understanding exhibiting the best of us - the Christ centred heritage of our nation. Christian Aid and in fact the gospel message calls us to recognise all people as loved by God, worthy of dignity, compassion and fair treatment. We need John's boldness to speak up and confront language which is dehumanising – in the media as well as in conversations with friends and families. Let us not stay silent.

John's message calls us to repent of to be changed, to turn away from the temptations and habits of selfishness and abuse of power and he points us to Jesus. Through Christ there is light, there is resurrection and eternal life in a Kingdom with no end, where there shall be no more tears, no more pain, no more death and separation. This is God's gospel promise and our hope in Christ who is Immanuel, God with us. He gives us power to be Christ's body in the world - the answer to 'I was hungry and you fed me, I was thirsty and you gave me a drink, I was naked and you clothed me'. To Light the Way and Change the Story.

Amen.