

A service for 12th May, 2024 (StF) Christian Aid

Call to worship: based on 1John Ch. 3 vs. 1 (Responsive)

We gather as children of God, bound to one another by love.

See what love the Father has given us.

We gather to live out our calling to love our neighbours and our enemies.

See what love the Father has given us.

We gather to experience in word and song, in prayer and worship, the overflowing compassion and tenderness of our God.

See what love the Father has given us.

Our opening hymn reminds us of our need for the light of God's love to guide us.

It was written by Bernadette Farrell, a gifted Roman Catholic hymn-writer, a social activist from West Yorkshire, who was the first Deputy Director of Citizens UK and whose hymns span all denominations. We shall sing hymn number 706, 'Longing for light, we wait in darkness,'

1. Longing for light, we wait in darkness,

Longing for truth, we turn to you.

Make us your own, your holy people,

Light for the world to see. Chorus:

Christ, be our Light!

Shine in our hearts,

Shine through the darkness.

Christ be our Light!

Shine in your Church gathered today.

2. Longing for peace, our world is troubled.

Longing for hope, many despair.

Your word alone has power to save us.

Make us your living voice. Chorus:

3. Longing for food, many are hungry.

Longing for water, many still thirst.

Make us your bread, broken for others,

Shared until all are fed. Chorus:

4. Longing for shelter, many are homeless.

Longing for warmth, many are cold.

Make us your building, sheltering others,

Walls made of living stone. Chorus:

5. Many the gifts, many the people,

Many the hearts that yearn to belong.

Let us be servants to one another,

Making your kingdom come. Chorus:

© Bernadette Farrell {1957---}

Aline's story part 1

Burundi is, financially, one of the poorest countries in the world. More than 70% of the population live in poverty. Most people get their living through farming, but farmers have been impacted significantly by the climate crisis, with droughts, floods and landslides to contend with. Many families eat just one meal a day.

Philip Galgallo, Country Director of Christian Aid, says, 'I think the biggest worry for most Burundian mothers is how they'll feed their children.'

Aline Nibogora faced extra challenges. She was abused by her husband and forced out of her home, becoming separated from her children. Homeless and worrying about her children's safety, Aline was forced into the most extreme poverty.

Let us pray

Almighty God, whose word made life throughout the universe, we come to offer our praise and thanksgiving to you. Christ Jesus, loving, faithful Son of our heavenly Father, you brought our salvation by dying on a cross at Calvary to break the hold of Satan and atoning for the sins of the world. By your resurrection you offer us everlasting life. We come to offer our praise and thanksgiving to you. Blessed Spirit, our Counsellor, Inspiration and Guide in our discipleship, we know that without you, we are helpless and hopeless. Come, lead us now and breathe new life into us.

Triune God our comforter, Redeemer and source of our hope, make your presence known to us today. Unite us as we worship you. Give us ears to hear the good news of your abundant, transformative love. Stir up in us a prophetic voice, so we may proclaim the coming of your kingdom. Inspire in us the courage to serve you in word and deed as together we build a world free from poverty. In Jesus' name. Amen.

In our prayer of confession, when I say, 'Out of the greatness of your love', please respond with, 'Lord, forgive us'.

Heavenly Father, you made us and cherish us and the whole of your creation. We confess that we have failed to care for the world you brought into being and over which you gave us stewardship. We have polluted the earth; we have consumed without thought for the future. We have hardened our hearts and turned away from communities devastated by the climate crisis.

'Out of the greatness of your love' **'Lord, forgive us'.**

Lord Jesus, you call us to love our neighbour, both friend and stranger; to go the extra mile. We confess that we have failed to love others as you have loved us. Too often we have ignored cries for justice and mercy. We have devoted our energies to protect what is ours and have failed to consider the needs of other people.

'Out of the greatness of your love' **'Lord, forgive us'.**

Spirit of truth and love, you breathe wisdom upon us and guide us in your ways. We confess that there are times we have relied upon ourselves alone, as though we have no need of you: times we have rejected the help our neighbours have offered because it would have cost our pride. We have become dried ground, unable to grow the fruits of love, peace, joy and gentleness, yet through all our failings and faults, you never leave us.

'Out of the greatness of your love' **'Lord, forgive us'.**

Loving God, we believe that you have not only pardoned and restored us, but call us to serve you and our neighbours gladly and faithfully, so our lives honour you in Jesus' beautiful name. Amen.

As our Saviour taught his disciples, we shall say:

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy Name; thy kingdom come; thy will be done; on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us. And lead us not

into temptation; but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, the power, and the glory, for ever and ever. Amen.

Aline's story part 2

Aline told Christian Aid of life without a home. 'I wandered the streets, asking anyone for a place to sleep. Those who showed me kindness would let me stay for two or three days, but it was difficult. Others would insult me and treat me with contempt. They forgot I am a human being and it filled me with sorrow.' However, Aline never gave up: pushed to the brink of survival, she pushed back.

Aline joined a community workshop led by Christian Aid-funded trainers. She learned about Village Savings and Loans Associations and became determined to form her own to help herself and others around her. Village Savings and Loans Associations offer a way for community groups to manage, save and lend money. Aline was able to buy a bicycle so she could transport her goods.

Our next hymn was written by Graham Kendrick for the 25th anniversary of the charity Tearfund in 1993 and followed Kendrick's visit to India the previous year.

Hymn number 693, 'Beauty for brokenness,'

**1. Beauty for brokenness, hope for despair,
Lord, in your suffering world this is our prayer.**

**Bread for the children, justice, joy, peace,
Sunrise to sunset, your kingdom increase!**

**2. Shelter for fragile lives, cures for their ills,
Work for all people, trade for their skills;
Land for the dispossessed, rights for the weak,**

Voices to plead the cause of those who can't speak. *Chorus:*

God of the poor, friend of the weak,

Give us compassion we pray:

Melt our cold hearts, let tears fall like rain;

Come, change our love from a spark to a flame.

**3. Refuge from cruel wars, havens from fear,
Cities for sanctuary, freedoms to share.
Peace to the killing-fields, scorched earth to green,
Christ for the bitterness, his cross for the pain. *Chorus:***

**4. Rest for the ravaged earth, oceans and streams
Plundered and poisoned – our future, our dreams.
Lord, end our madness, carelessness, greed;
Make us content with the things that we need. *Chorus:***

**5. Lighten our darkness, breathe on this flame
Until your justice burns brightly again;
Until the nations learn of your ways,
Seek your salvation and bring you their praise. *Chorus: © Graham Kendrick (born 1950)***

In our prayers of intercession we pray for our world and for the needs of ourselves and others. When I say, 'God, whose love endures forever', please respond, 'Hear our prayer'.

Loving God, we thank you for your enduring love: love that changes us, turns our priorities upside down and yet somehow makes us more fully ourselves. We offer our gratitude for people who have loved, cared for and inspired us; those who have seen us through troubled times and given us hope. We pray for those we love and for those we have failed to love. Remembering Aline's experience, we hold in mind people around the world who know what it is to be treated as less than human. May we work together to uphold the dignity of every human being, so nobody feels forgotten or worthless.

'God, whose love endures forever' **'Hear our prayer'**.

Lord, we are thankful for people who inspire us with their strength, courage, perseverance and endurance. Remember, in your mercy, people around the world brought to the brink by extreme poverty, who are struggling to survive. We pray for families in Burundi who have insufficient food, clean water or access to healthcare.

Fuel us with the fire of your Spirit; fill us with a fierce determination to end the outrage of poverty. May we hear the cries of those who are excluded from power, so we may speak up for them for a more equal and just world.

'God, whose love endures forever' **'Hear our prayer'**.

Lord of Shalom, we are grateful for peacemakers and healers. We pray for everybody who are reaching across divisions and acting to end violent conflict. May political leaders use their power wisely to further the cause of peace. We pray especially for an end to wars in Ukraine and in Gaza, but pray for peace to be established, too, in Sudan and Haiti, where fighting is leading to great suffering among civilians and for ongoing peace-making efforts in Burundi. Lord, remember in your compassion, all victims of warfare, terrorism, discrimination and oppression. Grant them all the courage and support they need to rebuild their lives. May be healed in body, mind and spirit.

'God, whose love endures forever' **'Hear our prayer'**.

Loving Lord, we are grateful that you offer to comfort us in our sorrows. Thank you that, when everything around us seems to crumble, you promise us that your love will remain solid and steadfast. Thinking of all that Aline has been through, we pray for her, her children and her community. Hear our prayer for others who are suffering, ill health, infirmity, loneliness, need or trouble and those who have lost someone they love. In a time of silence, we pray for everyone we know who needs your help

Lord, may we be sensitive to the needs of our neighbours, so we offer friendship and practical support to them, but we pray that you will enfold them in the warmth of your love, so they receive healing, hope, courage and enduring peace.

'God, whose love endures forever' **'Hear our prayer'**.

Abba, Heavenly Father, we pray you to accept and answer our prayers, not as we ask in our ignorance, nor as we deserve in our sinfulness, but as you know and love us in your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Our next hymn was written by Revd. Tim Hughes, vicar of St. Luke's, Gas Street, Birmingham. Hymn number 699, 'God of justice, Saviour to all'

**1. God of Justice, Saviour to all,
Came to rescue the weak and the poor;
Chose to serve and not be served.
Jesus, you have called us.**

Freely we've received, now freely we will give. *Chorus:*

*We must go,
Live to feed the hungry,
Stand beside the broken,*

*We must go.
Stepping forward,
Keep us from just singing
Move us into action,
We must go.*

**2. To act justly every day,
Loving mercy in every way,
Walking humbly before you, God.
You have shown us what you require.**

Freely we've received, now freely we will give. *Chorus (sung twice)*

**3. Fill us up and send us out,
Fill us up and send us out,
Fill us up, send us out, Lord.
Fill us up and send us out,
Fill us up and send us out,
Fill us up and send us out, Lord. *Chorus***

© *Tim Hughes*

The gospel reading is Matthew chapter 25 verses 31 to 40

"When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, he will sit on his throne in heavenly glory. All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate the people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. He will put the sheep on his right and the goats on his left. Then the King will say to those on his right,

'Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.'

Then the righteous will answer him,
'Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?' The King will reply, 'I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me.'" Amen.

We continue our worship with a hymn is Sydney Carter's, 'When I needed a neighbour, were you there?' which he wrote in 1965. Let us sing, hymn number 256, 'When I needed a neighbour, were you there?'

1. When I needed a neighbour, were you there, were you there?

When I needed a neighbour, were you there? *Chorus:*

*And the creed and the colour and the name won't matter,
Were you there?*

2. I was hungry and thirsty, were you there, were you there?

I was hungry and thirsty, were you there? *Chorus:*

3. I was cold, I was naked, were you there, were you there?

I was cold, I was naked, were you there? *Chorus:*

4. When I needed a shelter, were you there, were you there?

When I needed a shelter, were you there? *Chorus:*

5. When I needed a healer, were you there, were you there?

When I needed a healer, were you there? *Chorus:*

6. Wherever you travel, I'll be there, I'll be there,

Wherever you travel, I'll be there, *Chorus:*

And the creed and the colour and the name won't matter,

I'll be there.

© Sydney Carter {1915 – 2004}

Aline's story part 3

Aline's business was successful, so she was able to rent a house and was reunited at last with her three eldest sons, who came to live with her. She is hopeful that, one day, she will be together with all of her children. Aline can now afford food for herself and her family. She has bought solar panels to provide light so her sons can study.

Now Aline is baking her own bricks to build a stronger home for her family, in every sense. She told Christian Aid, 'We pray together as we are still alive thanks to God's grace We have been through difficult times, but now we make plans for the future.'

Sermon: *'I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers or sisters of mine, you did for me.'* Mt 25:40

From ancient times, rulers in the Near East often styled themselves as shepherds of their people, for in agricultural societies, the image of a shepherd tending his sheep was a powerful one, emphasising the strength, courage and wisdom of the king against the relative helplessness of his people. Unfortunately for the Jews of both the Northern and the Southern Kingdom, their kings were a very mixed bunch, with pitifully few following God's ways and caring for ordinary people. This explains why Ezekiel wrote critically of the weak rule of the kings of Judah and their disastrous effects on his fellow-citizens. Six hundred years later, Jesus used the same imagery in Matthew chapter 25, because of the rule of corrupt Herodians and religious establishment, the Sanhedrin.

The prophet **Ezekiel was born during the reign of King Josiah**, after whose rule the land went into decline as neighbouring powers threatened. ***The Assyrian Empire collapsed, but was replaced by the mighty Babylonian Empire that threatened Judah and conquered much of it before Jerusalem and its temple were destroyed in 597 BC.*** Ezekiel was a contemporary of **Jeremiah** and also preached of the need for Judeans to turn once more to God, or face the consequences. ***He was deported to Babylon with King Jehoiachin and the last group of Jews from the Holy City.*** However, Ezekiel did not just predict the destruction of a faithless people, he also preached that God would restore the remnant himself and would establish a just society under a new David. The fat sheep would no longer dominate the thin sheep in the new order, for God's Chosen One would tend them and be their shepherd.

In our Gospel reading, Jesus tells us how he will separate the good from the bad when he comes in glory, as a shepherd distinguishes between sheep and goats – it was not such an easy thing to do in the Near East at the time of Jesus, for the native sheep of Judah bore a striking resemblance to goats, unlike the fluffy ones we see in this country. The criterion on which judgement will be made has nothing to do with status, or scholarship, or being religious, or self-righteousness: people will be judged by the way they honour the second part of the Greatest Commandment: **'to love your neighbour as you love yourself'**. It is clear that the truly righteous may not even know that they

have served Jesus by helping those in need, but that is precisely what Jesus is asking his followers to do.

When Jesus as Shepherd said, **‘Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me’**, they asked when they had done anything to him. His reply is illuminating: **“The King will reply, ‘I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers or sisters of mine, you did for me.’”** In effect, we are called to continue what Jesus had declared he had come to fulfil: to reach out and help the needy, here and abroad without seeking or expecting to be rewarded. Caring for others is not an add-on to our faith: it is a fundamental part of it. We don’t help because we want the Lord to love us more – he can’t as he already loves us to the uttermost – but we know we have been blessed by his grace and want to bless others in return. By helping, we recognize our common humanity. We are Christ’s earthly hands and, just as he offers practical love, so we are called to do the same.

Sadly, Aline’s story is far from unique. Nine-tenths of the world lives in grinding poverty, exacerbated by the effects of both globalization and global warming. Far too many people in this country are living in poverty, but their plight is minimal compared with the need of the Developing World. Christian Aid was founded in 1945 by a number of British and Irish churches to help refugees from the Second World War. By working with partner organizations, Christian Aid expanded its outreach to the most vulnerable people across the world, not only providing disaster relief, but by working to eradicate poverty by providing equipment and training to help communities support themselves. Deep wells provide clean piped water for both hygiene and land irrigation. Solar power provides lighting and runs electrical equipment, allowing businesses to be run and children educated. People helped by Christian Aid are not made to feel like beggars, but are dignified by having some control over their futures. It is also bold in publicizing that developing countries lose more money through the tax evasion practices of large corporations than they receive through official aid which is scandalous.

Finally, notice how the Shepherd image does not only involve caring for the helpless, hurt, stray and weak, but shows strong leadership. The Church is called, therefore, not only to look to the needs of the vulnerable and marginalized of this country and further afield, but to be a voice to the world with or through Christian Aid. We are challenged to stand up for a world where justice and mercy are extended to all, which means courting unpopularity at times. Jesus willingly did so, because he cared for all-comers, particularly the poor, foreigners, social rejects and downtrodden. Sometimes, it is tempting to remain silent, to do nothing, just so we may have a quiet life, but that’s not Christ’s way. A practical way we can make a change is by supporting Christian Aid Week and joining in their lobbying campaigns. Remember, **‘Whatever you do for one of the least of these brothers or sisters like Aline, you do for Christ.’ Amen.**

Aline’s story part 4

Burundi remains one of the toughest places on earth to live, so Aline and her family still face challenges. When a ferocious storm destroyed Aline’s home, almost killing her and her children, she was able to recover by selling the cows she had been keeping. Now, when crises threaten her family’s future, Aline has options. Even a

small purchase can provide just enough resilience to weather the most brutal of Burundi's storms.

Aline is now the chairperson of a Village Savings and Loans Association that she founded and she's used her experience to help transform the lives of 25 families, who are building their own brighter future together. Aline says, 'If anyone has a problem, we help them find a solution The members thank me for the training and the positive impact it has had on their daily lives. People come to me, as they trust me. Here in Burundi, a neighbour is considered a member of the family.'

Our closing hymn was written by Charles Wesley in 1747 and has several settings, which can lead to organists being accused of 'playing the wrong tune'. It was originally set to a song from Henry Purcell's opera, 'King Arthur', now known as "Westminster (Sacred Harmony)", but usually now to William Rowlands' "Blaenwern", written during the 1905 Revival and named after a farm where he recuperated from a serious childhood illness. Hymn number 503, 'Love divine, all loves excelling,'

**1. Love divine, all loves excelling,
Joy of heaven to earth come down,
Fix in us thy humble dwelling,
All thy faithful mercies crown.
Jesu, thou art all compassion,
Pure, unbounded love thou art;
Visit us with thy salvation,
Enter every trembling heart.**

**2. Come, almighty to deliver,
Let us all thy life receive;
Suddenly return, and never,
Never more thy temples leave.
Thee we would be always blessing,
Serve thee as thy hosts above,
Pray, and praise thee without ceasing,
Glory in thy perfect love.**

**3. Finish then thy new creation,
Pure and spotless let us be;
Let us see thy great salvation
Perfectly restored in thee:
Changed from glory into glory,
Till in heaven we take our place,
Till we cast our crowns before thee,
Lost in wonder, love and praise!**

© Charles Wesley {1707 – 1788}

Benediction

The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with us now and forevermore. Amen.