

**St. Ninian's Parish Church**  
**Sunday 13th May 2018**  
*Acts 1: 15 - 17 21 - 26*

We've heard three stories this morning supplied by Christian Aid about people struggling to live after being displaced from their homes. Here's a fourth.

At 3.30pm on 12 January 2010, Pastor Clement set out from his home in Port-au-Prince, Haiti's capital city. He was travelling to Gros Morne, a town 160km away in the north of the country, because his mother had died three days earlier. He was returning to the town where she was born for her funeral the next day. Two hours later, at 5.30pm, he was just 15km from Gros Morne when he heard that there had been a major earthquake in Port-au-Prince.

When he got back to Port-au-Prince, he found his wife and children struggling in truly horrific conditions. The earthquake had killed thousands of people. Fortunately Pastor Clement's house was still standing, but his family were afraid to go inside, and were forced to search for a safe place of shelter.

For two nights they stayed in a temporary camp in the suburbs, before crossing the border to the neighbouring Dominican Republic, to a town called Jimani. There, a local pastor helped Clement find a house that he could rent for his family. Clement then went back to Port-au-Prince to help those in desperate need. He coordinated the response of one of Christian Aid's partner organisations, the Social Mission of Haitian Churches, and set up four camps in the grounds of churches. These camps welcomed in those made homeless and vulnerable by the earthquake.

One evening, Clement returned to the Dominican Republic. He spent time with his family, then went out to the Jimani town square where there were many homeless people who had fled Haiti. There he met Benito, a young Dominican man, who showed Clement his sleeping bag and the corner where he had spent the previous night.

Assuming that Benito had been visiting Haiti during the earthquake, Clement asked him how he had managed to survive. To Clement's surprise, Benito told him that he was from the Dominican Republic and that after the earthquake had hit Haiti he had travelled to the Haiti-Dominican Republic border in order to live alongside people displaced by the earthquake. He had wanted to send money to help, like many people around the world. But, because his family was poor and he didn't work, he had nothing to give. Benito had simply come to Jimani in order to be with the Haitians, to sleep alongside them - to share their suffering.

There are 65 million people in the world today who have been displaced from their homes. They live in countries of the world that are unstable: unstable politically, often their governments are weak; unstable geologically, they are often prone to events like earthquakes; unstable economically, they often have to rely on few natural and human resources to build a prosperous economy; unstable as a

society, civil wars and armed conflicts hamper rebuilding and help after disaster strikes.

We, who benefit from more stability in our lives, can help those whose lives lack stability through the work of aid agencies like Christian Aid, which in this service we are supporting today. The money we donate makes a difference and transforms lives. For example, just £210 could pay to train a local builder in Haiti. Christian Aid, through their partners on the ground, ensures that the money we donate goes to do just that sort of thing.

This kind of a response, sending money where money is needed, is a very human reaction when we hear news about other people who are suffering elsewhere in the world. Giving a bit to help from our wealth, which has been built from the stability of our lives, provides a foundation for other people to rebuild their lives. Christian Aid's slogan for this year is, 'together we are stronger than the storms,' and it is true that when we as human beings pull together, we can build more than the storms of life can destroy.

However, there is more than just a transfer of wealth through monetary donations implied in the Christian Aid slogan for this year, 'together we are stronger than the storms'. We who support Christian Aid know that there is more to do than just responding to our human desire to help other human beings from a distance when they are in need. Our faith, and because Christian Aid is a Christian aid agency, requires us to understand our relationship with other people in the same way that we believe God understands his relationship with us.

Because we believe that Jesus Christ, is the presence of God on earth: he lived alongside us; he suffered alongside us; he was killed by human selfishness and greed, he died alongside us, so we believe that God is not a remote being with whims that are expressed through meteorological violence that we are at the mercy of.

Just as God is present with us in Jesus Christ, so we are called as believers in this incarnate, in-the-world, embodied God to be present with those people who share the world with us, but who don't share the stability of life that we enjoy. Just as we believe that God is not a remote and whimsical presence in our lives, so we should not be a remote and whimsical presence in the lives of others.

That was why Pastor Clement in our story this morning was brought up short when he realised that Benito who had nothing had nevertheless travelled to sleep and share in the suffering of those who were victims of the earthquake. Being alongside people in their suffering is no small thing, it is why, in its own small way, for example, one of the most important things a person can do when they hear that a friend is ill in hospital is not just to send a card, but even more than that to actually visit their friend, to be present with them in their suffering. A card or a gift sent to someone who is suffering is kind and thoughtful, but your presence is a blessing.

As Jesus said in the parable of the sheep and the goats in the Gospel of Matthew, '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; naked, and you clothed me; I was sick, and you visited me; I was in prison, and you came to me.<sup>1</sup>

It isn't just the help that is offered that is important, what makes a difference is the solidarity, the waiting alongside, the sharing in another's plight, which creates a relationship between those who are suffering and those who are helping. It is that relationship that makes us all stronger together than the storms of life.

This emphasis on the strength of relationships as the foundation of connecting with others, rather than simply connecting from afar, is also the reason behind the way the disciples of Jesus chose a successor to Judas in this morning's reading from the Book of Acts.

When the disciples of Jesus gathered together after Jesus had departed from them they looked to replace Judas with another in order to bring their number back up to twelve. Twelve was a significant number of disciples; it represented the twelve tribes of Israel, and was probably chosen for that reason. But, importantly, after the loss of Judas, the disciples sought to add to their number someone who had followed Jesus from his baptism to his resurrection; someone who had lived with Jesus, spent time with him, and who had seen and witnessed to what had happened to him.

The important criteria in choosing someone to complete the twelve was someone who had had a relationship with the living Jesus. These disciples recognised that they were a stronger group when they were bound together in a relationship that was based on their relationship with Jesus.

When we support Christian Aid, which is the principal way that we at St. Ninian's help the poorest people in the world, we do so not just through an appeal and by donating money to be sent to countries far from here. Importantly, we do it by committing ourselves to building relationships with one another; to building relationships the people we live amongst; and to building relationships with the people who we are concerned to help.

The Bridge walk and the lunch after the service are two ways by which we build relationships with each other so that together our support for Christian Aid and our giving for the poorest people are strengthened. It is not individuals that support Christian Aid, it is St. Ninian's; and together our commitment is more lasting, more committed, more sustainable than it would be if we as individuals did this alone.

The door-to-door collections create relationships and bonds with the people we live amongst so that they too can be part of a collective and consistent effort to help those who are poorest in the world. By going door-to-door we say that the church is an institution that supports the poorest people, and we witness to our faith by asking others to be part of that relationship of care and concern.

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<sup>1</sup> Matthew 25: 35 - 37

Thirdly, the stories we read in church and the material we use for worship helps us to build a relationship even at a distance with people we would never otherwise have heard of. Our money doesn't just go into a black hole of aid; it goes to help people like Vilia, Marcelin, Zaza and Pastor Clement.

When God built a relationship with us through Jesus Christ by becoming one of us and suffering alongside us, our relationship with God became stronger and more personal. When we seek to emulate this friendship that God built with us by recognising the suffering of others in an unstable world and by building relationships between ourselves; with those around us; and with the poorest people in the world, then we as human beings in this world are stronger together than the storms that threaten to blow us away.