

Sunday 12th May am. Acts 9:36-end, Rev 7:9-end, John 10:22-30.

May I speak in the name of the living God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, Amen. Please do have a seat.

“no mum should die in childbirth” ...this is the theme of Christian Aid week 2019, which is focussing on the health care needs of pregnant mums and babies in Sierra Leone. In 2019 **no** mum should die in childbirth through lack of basic medical care, yet in Sierra Leone 10 mums a day die in childbirth.

The aim of Christian Aid this year is two-fold. Firstly, it is to raise money to build new and bigger health care centres, available to all women, to ensure more mums see their babies grow and enjoy fulness of life. Secondly, Christian Aid is asking the UK government to use its influence on the International Monetary Fund to drop Sierra Leone’s debt on the loans given for fighting the Ebola outbreak in 2014.

I would like to introduce you to Jebbeh, you have perhaps seen a photograph of her as you walked into church this morning...this is Jebbeh’s story which Christian Aid have invited us to share...

“Jebbeh is one of the kindest people you will ever meet. She has a warm smile and motherly touch. But her life has been incredibly tough. Recently, Jebbeh’s sister, Fatmata, was pregnant in a village nearby. When she went into labour there were so few ambulances that Fatmata had no choice but to walk for three hours, under the baking sun, to the nearest hospital.

The road was long, and she struggled to keep walking. With every step, Fatmata feared for her life and the life of her baby. Jebbeh told us: ‘My sister was crying out with hunger. She died on the side of the road. She never gave birth.’ No woman should die in childbirth. But for Jebbeh, this wasn’t just any woman. This was her sister – her strength, her comfort, her own...

Jebbeh herself is heavily pregnant. As her baby grows, it’s not joy that fills her heart, but fear. Pregnancy should be a time of joy, not a time of fear. But instead of buying new baby clothes, Jebbeh has gone to her sister’s burial. Instead of excitement and joy, she feels pain and sorrow. She cries, and we cry with her.”

“I’m afraid”, Jebbeh says. “I pray when that day comes, God will help me to deliver safely, so that I can have a bouncing baby and I’ll be healthy”.

Jebbeh's story sits close to my heart. I have been blessed with two wonderful sons. 32 years ago, I gave birth to Jonathan by emergency caesarean section in Stobhill General Hospital in Glasgow. I had access to the skills of doctors and midwives, to all the equipment and drugs I needed...it was a safe place to give birth and Jonathan weighed in at a healthy 9 and a half pounds.

Surely that is the right of every pregnant woman across the world today. Today Sierra Leone is one of the most dangerous places in the world in which to give birth. Occasionally over the last 32 years I have wondered what would have happened to Jonathan and me if I hadn't have had access to the medical care that we both needed...

Our second reading this morning from The Revelation to John, John in his vision in the throne room gives us hope and draws our attention to God wiping away every tear from the eyes of those who have suffered.

I want to read to you the last two verses of that reading again...

"they will hunger no more, and thirst no more; the sun will not strike them, nor any scorching heat; for the Lamb at the centre of the throne will be their shepherd, and he

will guide them to springs of the water of life, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes."

I pray that Jebbeh can find comfort and hope in those words of scripture and that God will wipe away the tears from her eyes.

The heavenly visions of Revelation show us how God wants things to be, this is what we are asking for every time we say the Lord's prayer which we will say together later in the service... "your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as in heaven".

Revd Christina, a minister in Sierra Leone who partners with Christian Aid to spread healthcare messages, reflecting on John's vision says... "there will no longer be tears in the eyes of women as it is now, when there are enough hospitals to take care of pregnant women".

Nurse Judith works in a health care centre. Her life saving work is sponsored by RADA an agency working alongside Christian Aid. The centre is woefully inadequate, the roof leaks, there are only 2 delivery beds, there is no lighting which makes deliveries during the night dangerous. The Ebola crisis killed 10% of Sierra Leone's healthcare workers.

Last year St John's raised £4500 for Christian Aid. If we raise that amount again this year the money would buy 15 delivery beds and mattresses, or 90 community health workers kits including a bicycle and torch, or 45 bundles of zinc to be used as a roof for a new health centre.

We can make a valuable difference.

The debt repayments Sierra Leone is having to make is taking money away from healthcare. It is vital that this debt is written off. At the back of church is a petition to the Chancellor of the Exchequer which I hope you will sign this morning and I will make sure this goes off to Christian Aid.

Revd Christina's work with Christian Aid has been instrumental in getting healthcare messages across...this is her ministry and her vocation... As well as the beginning of Christian Aid week, today is Vocation Sunday...

The Diocese of Sheffield fosters a culture of vocation in both ordained and lay ministry. On Saturday morning a week ago, members from churches in the Hallam deanery gathered to hear Bishop Pete deliver the new diocesan

strategy, which was a difficult and challenging message to listen to.

Presently the diocese has 102 stipendiary clergy. Church attendance is falling and there is pressure on budgets. If these trends continue over the next 10 years the number of stipendiary clergy will fall to just 75 resulting in clergy being more thinly spread. This will affect churches in our deanery and in our own mission partnership. Churches will have to share clergy, and to fulfil the priestly ministries of Baptism and Eucharist, remaining available in all churches every week there will be more reliance on retired clergy and self-supporting ordained ministers.

There is likely to be a restructuring of deaneries from 12 to 6 partnering Hallam with Ecclesfield. Matthew has already alluded to this at our annual meeting a couple of weeks ago.

There was one clear message which came across from the senior staff team and it was that lay ministry is so important. All baptised Christians have a ministry and vocation; to quote Bishop Pete "every baptised person has a part to play; that there is a need for a culture shift in congregations" ...end of quote.

Vocation is about everyone, we all have a ministry and vocation and we need to reverse the concept that lay ministry is only for those who are licenced or authorised, it isn't...every baptised person is a lay minister. God calls all of us to follow and serve Jesus Christ, to be part of His body, the church, to love each other and care for the world in which we live, and God uses us all to do extraordinary things.

In the prayer area at the back of church I have put a few prayer cards to use over a week, any week, to guide you in prayer. It is a call for the renewal and increase of vocations throughout the Church of England and the hope is that time spent in prayer will also kindle individual vocations too.

Today is a busy Sunday with a lot to say on two important areas of mission, the 'missio dei'...the mission of God...

As you leave church this morning I encourage you to pause for a moment at the top of the steps and to see the beauty of God's creation around you, then hold in your prayers through the week our parish; for the street collections taking place for Christian Aid and the mums to be in Sierra Leone...that people will be generous in their giving, so we can make a difference and also for our

parish and its future as part of a mission partnership which is already growing and developing.

Amen.