

To look with tenderness: A sermon from USPG for 14 June 2020

Then he said to his disciples. "The harvest is plentiful, but the labourers are few; therefore, ask the Lord of the harvest to send out labourers into his harvest"

Between the words that are spoken and the words that are heard, may God's holy Spirit whisper into the depths of our hearts. Amen

Warm greetings to you from my home in South London as we gather for worship – remotely, online, in our homes – in this season of Pentecost when we reflect on our Lord's call to go out into the harvest, to pray for the spirit to inspire us as Christian community that **we** might be the labourers to bring renewed and renewing life to God's world.

As we begin to emerge blinking into the light as lockdown eases – so we have been confronted once again with the brutal realities of racial injustice and by those words that speak so powerfully to each one of us at a deeply human level: 'I can't breathe'; words that also remind us that in our current context of COVID-19 the reality is that some groups of people have suffered considerably more than others. Injustice has a structural and systematic element.

With the death of George Floyd, the protection and justice that the law is supposed to bring was cruelly denied and abused - again. And inevitably, righteous anger is expressed in gatherings and protests across the world.

And so, in the midst of the COVID pandemic, our attention has been drawn to another deeper more persistent pandemic – that of racism and that justice is not experienced in the same way by people of different ethnicities, classes or backgrounds. And that injustice has been there in the midst of the COVID-19 crisis.

Across the world over the last few months, some of our Anglican sisters and brothers have suffered severe food shortages or a complete collapse in livelihoods with nothing to fall back on. Others, for example, especially the poor and indigenous groups in Brazil or the Philippines, have suffered abuse or worse at the hands of military or police forces during this time.

Our Gospel reading paints a picture of a crowd of people, a crowd of needy people, 'harassed and helpless', leaderless, crying out for support – spiritual, pastoral, practical. And as we read: Jesus had 'compassion on them'. The Greek is perhaps better translated as Jesus 'was filled with tenderness'. This is the very heart of Jesus' ministry – that tender love that God in Christ has for his people.

For most of us, crowds of people make us anxious whether their cry is for justice or bread; we recoil from them neediness, we are fearful that we will be overwhelmed. But Jesus's sees something very different; where others see brokenness, helplessness, a source of despair, he sees beyond to a glorious harvest, he sees the renewed and renewing life of God in those he loves, his people. He sees transformation. And, of course, in today's reading he calls his disciples and us to join in with him in that transformation, in reaching out to others.

On hearing these words, this call to mission, to a glorious harvest, the challenge to be one of those few labourers, today we may be tempted to think: That's 'all very well, but it's not great timing now; we need to wait. It's too soon. We need to recover, straighten things out, and then when we're sorted – we can begin to think of reaching out to others.

And that's very natural. The current pandemic is of course a unique and extreme crisis.

But of course, for many churches it is simply another extreme crisis.

Accustomed to precariousness and vulnerability, the churches in many societies are so often the communities of resilience and hope who reach out, who inspire confidence and build morale helping others to realise their own capacity to repair, rebuild, reconstruct: their buildings, their lives, their communities – often helped by expressions of solidarity and support from within the wider global Anglican family.¹

One of those extreme crises has been the HIV/AIDS epidemic, which has killed 15 million people in Sub-Saharan Africa and had a devastating impact on the economy. HIV/AIDS frightens people and unsurprisingly

¹ For example the impact of Cyclone Idai on the Church in Mozambique:
<https://uspglive.org.uk/wpress/2019/03/emergency-relief-our-partner-churches-need-your-help/>

one of the ongoing legacies of the pandemic is stigma – with those who are HIV-Positive even those who are healthy and on medication, being shunned and stigmatised.

Linda, a woman in the Diocese of Harare, Zimbabwe describes her experience as follows:²

'I am a forty-year-old HIV positive single mother. I was side-lined by my community and my four children were mocked at school. I felt so much shame and suffering that I contemplated suicide.'

Recognising this, in 2015, the Anglican Church in Zimbabwe launched an HIV/AIDS Stigma Reduction Programme and last year, in my capacity as the General Secretary of the United Society Partners in the Gospel, I had the immense privilege of meeting with some of those involved in this important work.

To succeed the church has had to work with a wide range of groups – traditional healers, village chiefs, hospitals, schools, other churches, the government of Robert Mugabe and his successor – and in partnership with USPG. The work has involved priests and bishops talking about sexual relationships and practices. It has involved the training of lay people, often grandmothers, to talk to teenagers in their communities about all the aspects of HIV/AIDS. It has taken imagination and courage and resolve and commitment on the part of individuals and the church as a community.

The message is simple – it is about living positively – living positively with the diagnosis – but living positively with each other – affirming and accepting and including all. This initiative of the church is not simply about health - it is about self-esteem, belonging, what it means to be human, what it means to be family, community and it has taken the church onto the streets, into the marketplaces and a whole host of different spaces and gatherings. And the labour of such mission has involved - as it so often does – much singing and much dancing. It has been a labour of joy as well as perseverance. It is holistic mission – transformative, renewing of the whole person and the whole community – bringing a harvest of inclusive justice: Local mission, in the spirit of Jesus, gazing on the crowd, helpless and harassed, it does what the most effective sort of mission does – addresses the deep heartache of the people.

Christ-like mission, local and global, begins with that tender heart – with the eye of compassion – that really looks out on the world, and really pays attention, and sees, sees the potential in others in the midst of their pain and anxiety and loss – that breathes it all in yet through the Spirit seeks to breathe out hope and creativity and encouragement. But it also requires courage and commitment to take the first steps - for things to happen; but when it does the transformation is great, the harvest plentiful. The Anglican Church in Zimbabwe faces many, many challenges yet it lives and breathes resilience and hope – and in the midst of all strives for a justice for all. And so, Linda did not follow through with her suicidal feeling, instead her life was changed by the Stigma reduction programmes of the Church in Zimbabwe. In her words. It:

'changed everything. I declared my HIV status in church. I was fully accepted and elected to be church warden. Now I encourage others to disclose their status.'

It is no different for us: We too are called to look with tenderness on our world, to stand in solidarity with our sisters and brothers who face extreme challenges as they reach out in mission to others – but also to look with tenderness at our own local communities, to serve those around us, pastorally, practically – and to cry out for an inclusive justice, a justice for all, for a world that has no need for foodbanks, for campaigns like Black Lives Matter or for homeless charities – that all may breathe freely and take their place, perhaps near the centre of our communities.

Amen

² See an article in the Spring issue of *Transmission*, (USPG's supporter magazine, now *Koinonia*) p. 10. <https://www.uspg.org.uk/docstore/252.pdf>