



Service of Reflection – 2 November 2021

Address from Dr Rowan Williams, Chair of Christian Aid

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, Amen.

People are often asking these days, what are we going to remember from the last 18 months, or so? What are we going to remember from the pandemic period? And built into that, of course, is the question of, 'What are we going to take from it? What are we going to learn?' Because remembering is not just clocking in a few mental images. It's also looking at how we've changed. What has changed us, and why? And one of the risks that we face at the moment as we begin, very, very cautiously to emerge from the pandemic, is the risk of forgetting two kinds of things.

We can easily forget just what the personal cost has been to so many, in terms of loss and loneliness. And we're bound to be thinking at this time of year, especially, about those who have died, unable to be with those they love most, and their families and friends also denied access - unable to say a proper goodbye. We shouldn't forget that. It's something that tells us a really fundamental truth about who we are and our need of one another. Our need to feel that, in moments of extremity, we are not left abandoned, we are not forgotten.

But the other kind of forgetting is forgetting who has actually carried the greatest risk, paid the greatest price in this period. We think, of course, of those care workers and those providing basic social services in our own country, who have disproportionately faced the burden of disease, isolation, and exposure. But we can also think of all those in less prosperous countries who have, again, faced a disproportionate burden because of the lack of resources and infrastructure. Just at the moment, we're looking to the climate summit in Glasgow – the COP 26 conference. An occasion when, again, we are asked to remember those in our suffering and chaotic world who are currently bearing the greatest cost. Plenty to remember there, plenty to take with us.

And going back to that theme, that's perhaps the most important thing about remembering. To me, as to many, one of the most poignant episodes in St Luke's account of Jesus' crucifixion is when the thief crucified alongside Jesus says,

‘Remember me when you come into your Kingdom.’ I don’t think he’s asking for special treatment in the Kingdom of God, having an influential friend to speak for him. I think that in his torture and in his dying, he desperately needs to know that he’s not forgotten. He doesn’t quite know who it is, who is being crucified alongside him. But it’s somebody he wants to take him with him. To be where he is, wherever that may be.

When we remember those we have loved and lost, of course, we take them with us. And when we ask others to remember us, especially when we ask them to remember us in our own times of suffering or loneliness, we’re asking to be taken in company. We’re asking not to be left alone. And a world in which the Kingdom of God really is coming to birth is a world where people don’t get forgotten. Where all of us are willing to take others with us, to let them be where we are. And, of course, for us to be where they are. Remembering runs both ways. If we really take with us those we remember, we expose ourselves to their world, a world from which we would quite often like to be kept safe, a world of risk and pain and suffering. We open our doors; we remember in that sense.

When Christians celebrate Holy Communion, they remember what Christ did and suffered and what He does. They open their doors to take him with them. But in the Eastern Orthodox Church, one of the prayers before Holy Communion says to God, in the words of the thief on the cross, ‘remember us in your Kingdom.’ We say to God, ‘take us with you. Take us where you are because you have come where we are.’

All of these things swirl around in our minds at this time of year when remembrance is such a powerful theme for us. And when we are, all of us, dealing with memories of various kinds from the last year – of loss and struggle, difficulty, and isolation. But at the heart of it all is that vision of a world where we take one another with us. When we try to hold together what the circumstances of this world so often pulls apart. And particularly in this service of reflection, looking back on those whose legacy, in every sense, has enriched the work of Christian Aid. We look back on people who have themselves, remembered.

We remember those we’ve loved as remembering people, people who have not forgotten the rest of the suffering and struggling world. People who have taken with them, in prayer and in generosity, the pain and the challenge of the world we live in. But I hope that in this reflective service, we can also think, how would we like to be remembered?

In one of C.S. Lewis' books, 'The Great Divorce,' he sketches a very powerful and sometimes very entertaining, as well as very challenging, vision of Heaven and Hell. And one of the figures he sees in Heaven is a woman clothed in glory and beauty, attended by a great train of people all laughing and delighting in her company. 'Who on earth is this person?' says the narrator. 'Is she an angel? Is she the Virgin Mary?' She looks so important, and it's explained to the narrator that this is a very ordinary suburban housewife from north London, who just happened to have a rare gift for taking people with her. She poured out herself in hospitality and generosity, in all kinds of unobtrusive daily ways. She remembered people, and there she is, in Heaven, surrounded by those she remembered – those she brought together in the circle of her love and her acceptance. To be remembered as that kind of remembering person, that kind of welcoming person – that surely, is something we can all, in all humility, pray for, and long for.

And, on this occasion, as we give thanks and reflect on the gifts we've received, we can pray too, that, however hard it is, we go on being people of memory. People who don't forget those who are isolated in our world, whether it's our lonely neighbours around the corner, or those feeling deeply isolated and forgotten in the poorest and most challenged parts of the world. Those who are faced with the effects of climate change, rising sea levels, or soil degradation. Those who live with civil war, political oppression, endemic and pandemic disease, the crushing of aspirations and hopes. We can think of Afghanistan, especially, this year. These people need a future. They need hope. They need solutions. But all of that begins in the truth that they need to be remembered.

So, remembering those who, before us, have remembered. Remembering a God who remembers us, we can say to God today, 'help us not to forget. Help us to take with us the world we're in, to take it into the heart of your love, and to bring it that little bit closer to the exchange, the mutuality, the joy, and the peace of your Kingdom.

Amen

