

SERMON

The Rt Rev Dr Rowan Williams, Chair of Christian Aid

There's quite a lot, in the readings we've heard, about 'righteousness' – the promised king will govern in righteousness, the name of the long-awaited saviour will be 'the Lord is our righteousness'. But it's not, these days, a word we use very much except in a rather negative sense. 'Righteousness' suggests 'self-righteousness', a condescending and judgemental attitude. Even when we talk about 'righteous anger', for example, there is a slightly uncomfortable feel to it; it seems to be about laying hold of the moral high ground. It feels a bit 'weaponised' as we say these days.

But when the Jewish prophets talked about 'righteousness' and 'justice', the word they used in Hebrew was a word with a very different sound to it. It would have brought in associations with 'truthfulness', 'appropriateness', a right and fitting relationship with reality. Being 'righteous' was being connected with God and God's world in a way that truly fitted with what God was and what the world was.

That's surely why Jesus, in St Matthew's gospel, says that those who are hungry and thirsty for 'righteousness' are blessed. Human beings long to be properly related with the world they're in; no-one wants to be permanently out of sync with reality. And the deeper that passionate hunger for true and faithful relationship, the more our lives are open to God, the more we are blessed, fortunate, at home with things and with ourselves - even if that hunger for righteousness drives us to suffer and take risks.

It's nothing to do with any kind of stampede to the moral high ground. For us to be righteous, in the sense in which the Bible uses it, is for us to grasp by the truth, for us to fall in love with reality – God's reality and the world's – and to ask how we might learn to be more truthful, more real, more in touch with what is actually in front of our noses.

And that may help us see what that odd title, 'the Lord is our righteousness' might mean. The life of Jesus is a life completely shaped by the truth. He is gazing without interruption at the mystery of the love from which he comes, the love of the God he calls Father; and so he sees the reflection of that mystery wherever he looks around him on earth. He sees the need, the guilt, the pain of human beings; and behind and within it he sees the beauty and dignity of human beings, so that the pain and guilt appear for what they are, a terrible stain on the glory of women and men created to reveal the divine image. If we are living in the neighbourhood of Jesus, living in his Spirit, living as members of his Body, the community of his followers, we are gradually opening up to seeing what he sees.

We are learning to be truthful and to live in a way that – as we say – does justice to the truth of who God is and what God has done. His relation to reality becomes ours; he is our ‘righteousness’, the ground of a fitting and true relation to what is real. When I think about the work of Christian Aid, I think of the effort to be truthful – to see clearly the realities of human suffering and risk, to see clearly what kinds of action will best address and heal pain and privation, to see the dignity and beauty of women and men as they are in God’s eyes. It’s one reason why, when we campaign on the big global issues, we look to find the particular human stories that will bring them alive.

And we want people to see, not poor helpless victims, but men, women and children whose dignity as God’s image is so real and solid that we become hungry and thirsty to see that dignity made more visible, released to be more fully itself. It’s no use trying to do this without the unique, one-off stories of flesh and blood persons whose lives are being changed.

Looking forward to Christmas is looking forward to another chance to refresh that transforming vision of God’s truth. The very nature of God is to share the divine joy and beauty that is God’s eternally; yet our own selfishness and ignorance means we regularly go about not noticing what God has given to the world we live in. The gift of Jesus’s life restores our ability to see clearly and to act generously – to be ‘righteous’, to do justice to what’s really there in front of our noses. Like the shepherds in Bethlehem, we have seen the night sky lit up with splendour and radiance; and with them we set out to see what it is that God has done and what God is doing in our midst.