

A Sermon preached by Revd Eleanor Whalley at St Andrew's Church Soham on the Fifth Sunday of Easter and the First Sunday of Christian Aid Week, 14 May 2017. Acts 7: 55-end; John 14:1-14

May I speak and may we hear in the name of the living God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

I'm going to begin by reading you something I found on the Christian Aid Website. It's the story of the lady who's pictured on our Christian Aid envelopes <https://www.christianaid.org.uk/christian-aid-week/nejebars-story>:

Nejebbar fled Afghanistan with her family after the Taliban threatened to kill anyone who worked for the government, like her husband, Noor.

Imagine how they had felt when the Taliban carried out that threat on another family member, taking out his eyes before killing him.

Noor told us: 'The last days and weeks in Afghanistan were the hardest. When I went to work, my heart was beating harder. I didn't know if my family were going to be alive when I got back.'

The family are now stranded in a makeshift camp in Greece. They thought they would stay for 10 days, but they've been there six months and there's no end in sight.

Noor describes their initial reaction to arriving there: 'It was like suicide for us. But we took the decision that it is better to die here than to die there from war.'

The only protection they have against the wind and rain is their tent. There's no school for their children.

Five-year-old Sudai, their youngest, is ill. His tummy is swollen and he hasn't been growing as he should. Nejebbar and Noor don't know what's wrong with him because they can't communicate with the camp's doctor, who is Greek.

Nejebbar is the rock at the centre of her family, holding them together throughout all this uncertainty.

Despite her meagre circumstances, she has also welcomed brothers Faraidoon (22) and Farzad (13) into her home - they don't know where their parents are or if they're even alive.

Nejebbar told us: 'We still have some hope for our children's future. We only want a peaceful life. We want our children to go to school. The most important thing is our children'.

Refugees deserve better than this. Please give generously this Christian Aid Week, so we can build a world where everybody has a safe place to call home.

In the Gospel we heard just now, Philip says to Jesus: 'Lord, show us the Father, and we will be satisfied'. Jesus replies: 'Have I been with you all this time, Philip, and you still do not know me? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father'. Jesus is reiterating what he's just said to Thomas: 'If you know me, Thomas, you will know my Father also. From now on you do know him, and have seen him.'

The disciples have seen Jesus - and to have seen Jesus is to have seen the Father.

Our Gospel reading invites us to ponder the Jesus the disciples have seen. What is he like? What have the disciples seen?

If we restrict ourselves to John's Gospel - the Gospel from which today's reading comes - the disciples have seen Jesus as a man on the move. Jesus is walking when he calls his first disciples. The next day, he's still walking - walking this time to Galilee. On the way, he finds Philip and says to him 'follow me.'

'Follow me, Philip': leave stability behind you; become a follower of The Way; become a follower of the One who is The Way; become a man of the road.

Three chapters later, Jesus is walking again - walking from Judea back to Galilee; walking through Samaria; walking through alien territory.

Jesus is hot and he's tired and he's thirsty. He asks a drink of a Samaritan woman. In his need, he causes consternation: 'How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria? (The Jews had no dealings with Samaritans)'

Later, Jesus' journeying gets more uncomfortable still: he slips through the crowds. The religious authorities are preparing to stone him. Jesus is fleeing persecution.

One evening, at supper with his friends, he takes a towel and wraps his waist. He begins to wash his disciples feet. The conversation that follows is where today's Gospel picks up the story.

All this is what the disciples have seen. "Have I been with you all this time, Philip, and you still do not know me? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father".

The disciples have seen Jesus for years. We, John's readers, can see it all in one sitting (except, of course, we can never see it all). We get to read the whole of John's Gospel; and we get see something the disciples couldn't see: we get to read John's Prologue: 'In the beginning was the Word... The Word was made flesh and dwelt amongst us'. Or to translate it more literally, 'The Word was made flesh and pitched his tent amongst us'.

Jesus Christ, the Word of God, pitches his tent. He pitches his tent in Israel - in a country adjoining Syria. And having pitched his tent, Jesus lives a life which resembles in part the life of refugees today - a life like the lives of Nejebar and Noor; a life lived by generations of tent-dwellers: a life on the move; a life of struggle; a life of persecution; a life lived in solidarity with the poorest and most vulnerable peoples of this world.

And the disciples saw him. And other people saw him. And to have seen Jesus is to have seen the Father - the God and Father of us all.

As we reflect on that, I'm going to read a prayer. This was written for the first Christian Aid Week in 1958.

Let us pray:

O Christ our Lord who came in homelessness
that you might find a home in us and that everyone would find a home in you
we bring before you at this time all who are homeless, in exile or in suffering.
Grant them the sense of being held fast in you
and enable all who love you to strive together for a world which shall be closer to your Kingdom
in which all may live together as a family, each caring for all, and all caring for each,
for the sake of peace.
Amen.