

“Speak up for those who cannot speak for themselves, for the rights of all who are destitute. Speak up and judge fairly; defend the rights of the poor and needy.” Proverbs 31: 8 – 9

Dear Friends,

I was planning on offering a reflection for Advent in the pastoral letter this week, but I have changed my mind. I am angry as I sit here at the computer and write having read in the last couple of days details of the Government's decision to cut the Overseas Aid budget from 0.7% of GDP to 0.5%, thus breaking another of our commitments to the international community.

I cannot begin to comprehend the pressures that our politicians are under at the moment, particularly those in Government and those charged with maintaining the public finances in the face of the Covid pandemic and the economic damage that it has caused and will continue to cause. It was interesting to hear the Governor of the Bank of England this week suggest that the damage to the economy caused by Covid will be dwarfed by the damage to the economy should there be no trade deal with the EU but that is another matter for another day.

The Chancellor says that the cut to the aid budget will save £4billion. But at what cost? I fully understand that we are only just beginning to see the tip of the iceberg of the impact of covid on families and businesses up and down this land. Life is hard and is going to get harder. But let's not forget that we are still one of the richest countries and biggest economies in the world. We are a member not just of the G20 but that more exclusive club of G7 richest and most influential economies.

While we sometimes grumble about waiting lists, let's not forget that we have healthcare that is free at the point of delivery. While we sometimes moan about the state of school buildings and facilities, let's remember that all of our children can go to school for free every day. While we often worry about utility bills going up, let's not forget that our houses are connected to the power grid and water system and that we don't have to walk for hours each day to carry water back home that may not even be clean. While we want to be safe and protected, let's not forget that we have some of the best armed forces, counter-terrorist and emergency services in the world.

Yes, there are great social justice problems in our own society, which will indeed increase over coming months and years. And the solutions to these issues often do and have come from the voluntary sector and churches in particular, when the state has cut, and cut, and cut some more. But the issues in our society are a mere

shadow of those in so many places around the world. And that is not to be disrespectful to those in our society who are struggling to eat, or to heat their homes, or indeed to those who are homeless or live in temporary accommodation. There is always more that we can do to make our own society fairer and more just.

But the cost to our influence for good on the world stage, the cost to the most deprived communities on the planet, the cost to our own security. Even the Conservative MP Tobias Ellwood, Chair of the Commons select committee on defence has said that the cut “will come back to haunt us.” And the Minister for sustainable development has quit in protest, saying the decision is “fundamentally wrong.”

But as Christians, irrespective of our political views, we are citizens of something bigger and more influential than the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. We are citizens of a global society and we are citizens of the Kingdom of God. And as citizens of the kingdom of God we are called to “speak up for those who cannot speak for themselves, for the rights of all who are destitute. Speak up and judge fairly; defend the rights of the poor and the needy.”

These verses from Proverbs 31 were often quoted by the German theologian and Pastor Dietrich Bonhoeffer in the years leading up to World War 2. He used them to urge his fellow Christians to speak up for all those who were being persecuted by the Nazi regime, for all those who at that time and in that country had no voice and no rights.

They are a clarion call to the church today. The following words are taken from an article on the Methodist Church website today:

“Following the announcement by the Chancellor of the Exchequer today that the foreign aid budget will be cut from 0.7% of national income to 0.5%, the President and Vice-President of the Conference have made the following statements:

The Revd Richard Teal, President of the Conference of the Methodist Church in Britain, said:

To go back on our promises to the world’s poorest people would be short-sighted, unprincipled and wrong. The UK has a global reputation for the quality of its international development work. The government has just announced a big increase in spending on defence. In the light of this it is counter-productive to cut the vital aid that helps to build more stable communities and open societies. We are also recognised for our determined support of the international 0.7% target. This huge cut reneges on a commitment that we have made internationally. It is a commitment that our churches have welcomed on many occasions and one that we want to see maintained.

Carolyn Lawrence, Vice-President of the Conference of the Methodist Church in Britain, said:

Our aid programme is vital and effective. It supports education, helps people to escape from chronic poverty and provides women with the opportunities to overcome entrenched discrimination. The Methodist Church in Britain's partners in various parts of the world have direct experience of the value of UK aid and the good that it has brought to their communities. A cut in funding will inevitably undermine vital support to programmes at a time when people are particularly vulnerable. We urge MPs to resist this cut and appeal to the government to think again."

I urge you, as Methodist Christians, this Advent, to do three things: 1, Write to your MP to let them know your views on this issue. 2, Do all you can to support those in our own society who are struggling financially at this time. 3, Find some way of supporting an Overseas Aid charity. There are lots of them to choose from! The Methodist Church charity for humanitarian relief and development is called "All we can." It's name stems from some famous words attributed to John Wesley's: "Do all the good you can, by all the means you can, in all the ways you can, in all the places you can, at all the times you can, to all the people you can, as long as ever you can."

Every Blessing,

Rev Tim