

SERMON AT ST. JOHN THE EVANGELIST CHURCH, TROWBRIDGE. 23 March 2003

Every one of us has suffered, most of us in a variety of ways, throughout our lives. This individual suffering is unique and should not be belittled. But the Sudanese people have suffered collectively and individually for so long that our minds sometimes shy away from even trying to understand the enormity of their experience. For almost 50 years and with scant interruption, civil war in Sudan has brought suffering which includes loss of life, of loved ones, of home, of culture, property, educational opportunity, health and livelihood. All this has resulted in such agony of spirit, such psychological anguish and resultant anger, hatred and bitterness that those who try to help the Sudanese - whether to make peace or simply to survive and hold on to hope - risk feeling overwhelmed.

Women are among those who suffer most intensely in Sudan. By listening to their stories, by taking in even a small measure of what they have endured and continue to experience, our hearts begin to open to the compassion which Jesus felt so intensely that he wept over Jerusalem. However, to begin to look with the heart on the suffering of other people can be dangerous to our natural desire to shield ourselves from trauma, to our tendency to cling to that which is known, safe and secure. There is good reason why many people avoid attending to the pain of others. But what we fail to understand when we do so is that by reaching out to those who suffer, we receive the grace of sharing in God's suffering over them.

I remember vividly one of the first occasions on which I was asked to enter into the suffering of Sudanese women. It was 1996, in the Nuba Mountains, a place devastated by war, famine, tyranny, poverty and ill health. The Episcopal Bishop of El Obeid Diocese, with whom we were visiting the scattered Christian communities, turned to me and said, "Now, Lillian, you speak to the women!" I refused immediately. What was I going to say to women who had experienced the loss of their husbands, their homes and most of their children? But as I look back, I recognize that occasion as a turning point in my life. For after I said no, another Voice, which I could not refuse, repeated that simple sentence in my heart: "Lillian, speak to the women!" It was an order to share, to get involved. From somewhere deep inside me courage arose.

So I told those women of the time in my childhood when a woman asked my mother which of her several children was her favorite. My mother answered that her favorite child was the one who was sick, the one who was injured or had been wronged, the one who was suffering. "God", I told the women, "loves us like that". You are God's preferred daughters for you are suffering. You have the attention of God our Mother." Only later did I understand that God had used those women to get my attention. A year and a half later, after that useful bishop had died, I set up an educational fund in his name. The Bishop Mubarak Scholarship Fund for Nuba Women.

You see, it is not God's will or God's doing that some of us suffer so much more than others. But it is God's way to draw the suffering of others to our attention in order to ignite our compassion and then move our hearts to help them as well as ourselves.

A awareness of the suffering of others challenges our complacency, our selfishness, and our life styles. Once we start down the road of awareness, we usually find that there is no turning back. And the reason, of course, is that in opening our hearts to those who are hurting, hungry, disadvantaged, alone, displaced, sick, our eyes are also opened to discover the Lord. Like the followers of Mother Teresa, the Missionaries of Charity, we begin to understand the possibility of "worshipping God in the bodies of the poor." This is the path to blessing.

Africans frequently have significant dreams, which they understand as a means of communication with the Divine. While in Kenya early this month, a woman told me her life story of abuse, emptiness and rejection. But the low point became the turning point, she told me, when God sent her a dream in which he wrote out a message for her on the wall.

It was a message of only two words, but when she told me, we laughed together with joy.

"Grace," God wrote on the wall, and then "Compassion." But that's it, I said! Grace is what God does within you and compassion is what he is prepared to give through you. The woman, whose name is Rose, works as a chambermaid at a conference center in Kenya where the Sudanese peace negotiations were ongoing. She still has many problems but grace seems now to have transformed her life into one in which compassion plays a central role. How could that round of peace talks fail when Rose was praying fervently that God would reconcile the Sudanese?

The truth which Rose has learned is that opening our hearts to the suffering of others makes us vulnerable not only to suffering but to growth. The seed cannot grow into a plant unless it falls into the ground and germinates. By opening ourselves to the suffering of others instead of shielding ourselves against it, we begin to understand the truth that "strength is made perfect in weakness".

God is constantly trying to break through to us with gifts of grace but usually we are not paying attention. Sometimes we get glimpses of that grace, of what we might have if we were to ask God to quicken within us. A special piece of music, a sunset, and a baby's smile reminded us of where we came from and where we are going. But for the most part we keep our heads down and don't get involved because we also know that involvement can sometimes get you crucified.

But God longs to fill us with grace. "Open your mouth wide," says the Psalmist, "and I will fill it." I like that image: we ought to be asking God for grace and compassion like baby birds ask their parents for food! When this begins to happen, service in one of its many forms naturally follows. And service is a sure channel by which abundant grace can pour into our lives. In fact, the cycle of grace goes like this: grace then compassion then service and then more grace. Service, you see, is active asking for God's presence in our own lives. I see this very clearly in the life of Olga Odera, a Sudanese woman whose name is known to some of you. Briefly let me tell you Olga's story.

In the autumn of 2000 Dave Lewis wrote to me asking whether it might be possible for St. John the Evangelist Church to pay the salaries of schoolteachers in Sudan. A few days later I received a letter from Olga, whom I had met several years earlier in Sudan, telling me that she had set up a school at Soba Aradi, a settlement outside Khartoum for displaced persons. "If I could just pay the teachers a small salary," Olga wrote, "I think I could keep the school going. Otherwise the teachers, who must work to eat, will have to go elsewhere and our 120 students will have no school." Thus was born a new Bishop Mubarak Fund project, the Project to Pay Kindergarten and Basic School Teachers' Salaries.

In its first year this project supported 10 teachers in three schools for displaced children, including salary to four teachers at Fulla Falls, Olga's school, which was paid by St. John the Evangelist Church, Trowbridge. In this academic year the Bishop Mubarak Fund is paying salary for 39 teachers responsible for 1,254 students in nine schools. And in the next school year, which begins in July, we will provide for 45 teachers in 12 schools, including one in the Nuba Mountains.

Let me tell you about Olga, a remarkable woman who fled from Juba in south Sudan after the loss of her husband and children. Eventually she found herself living in a squatter settlement on the outskirts of Khartoum. There grace turned her sorrow into compassion and she determined to set up a school for the children who constantly pestered her to teach them how to read. When I visited Fulla Falls School last month, I found eleven teachers teaching some 350 children in kindergarten through grade five. Grade six will open next year. And St. John's church has continued in partnership with others to support those teachers.

But Olga of the compassionate heart seems to be just beginning. In February she asked if I have any ideas about how she can help mentally retarded children and children who have been orphaned by AIDS. And then she showed me a photo of an arthritic old

woman who lives alone with a small granddaughter. Every day this old woman walks a great distance to chop firewood and then has to carry it back and sell it in order that she and the child can eat. Can we help this old granny, Olga asked.

Can we? I know that I would live a much less stressful life as the main fundraiser for two small charities working in Sudan, were it not for Olga and a few others like her. But I also know that without Olga I would have missed several opportunities, which have greatly enriched my life and my experience of God's love. God often brings people together in order to enlarge the channels through which grace and compassion can flow. Olga and I know this.

The support which St. John the Evangelist Church has given to Fulla Falls School has been seminal and more valuable than I can describe. I hope that you will continue in partnership with Olga for in this way you can worship God with the help of the suffering Sudanese. This is likely to be an even greater blessing to you than it is to them.