

Christian Aid Week

15–21 May 2011

Transforming communities



The gospel passage for Sunday 15th May contains one of the seven so-called 'I am' sayings of Jesus that are unique to John's gospel. The 'I am' formula echoes God's self-revelation in the Old Testament (see, for example, Exodus 3:6, 20:2). In John, though, Jesus' comments about himself spring from the context of his teaching or some other event. Most memorably, 'I am the resurrection and the life' (11:25) immediately precedes the raising of Lazarus. Here in John 10, Jesus' teaching about the nature of himself as the true shepherd of Israel is conveyed especially through the two statements, 'I am the gate for the sheep' (10:7) and 'I am the good shepherd' (10:11).

A word of warning: be aware that Jesus' teaching 'I am the gate for the sheep' (or, in some translations, 'I am the door') relates to God's future kingdom and not to this world. Don't be tempted to suggest that Christian Aid is the door and the sheep are our partners or beneficiaries. This sounds obvious, but it's easily done. However, it's fine to see Jesus knowing and leading out his sheep as a model for good leadership.

Introduction

Jesus' teaching that reflects a new and transformed community has an unlikely source: the rejection of someone who had previously been on the fringes of society. Look back to John 9 and the story of the man who had been blind from birth, and particularly at verse 34, where he is driven out. John 10 offers a picture of a new community where acceptance has nothing to do with social position and everything to do with trusting in Jesus' promise of life in all its fullness (10:10).

How a community is transformed

- Transforming communities begins with the vision of a few people and others catching that vision. John 10:1 (the thief who climbs into the sheepfold) reminds us of the bad practice of the old shepherds of Israel (see Ezekiel 34:1-6) whose actions denied people the opportunity to flourish. In contrast, the true shepherd, who enters by the gate, has a relationship with his flock based on trust – his actions affirm life and the flock flourishes.
- The shepherd image is echoed at the end of this gospel where Jesus tells Peter: 'Feed my sheep' (John 21:17).
- The description of the early Christian community in Acts 2 gives us an idea of how the vision of a few is caught and developed. In place of a group of individuals closeted away on their own (Acts 1:13-14), there is a vibrant community that eats together, learns together and prays together and takes its place in the wider society. Out of the strength of that togetherness springs social action (Acts 2:45). And there was great promise for the future (2:47).

How the transformed community sees itself

A transformed community will look to the future together. Here is an example from *Nicaragua*.

- The story of the Los Alpes cooperative in Jinotega is one of before and after.

Before, there was poor-quality coffee, poverty and no school. Although the community is still poor, there is now good-quality coffee, credit facilities leading to better incomes, and a new school, offering new hope for the next generation. Los Alpes teenager Martha Talavera, the niece of Gustavo Adolfo Talavera, explains:

'We used to have lessons in my uncle's front yard. When it rained we used to get soaked. Now we have a school.

'Before we didn't have a bridge and when the floods hit we could not cross. Children had to go through the water or wait till the water subsided. Now we have a bridge and everyone uses it.'

- A transformed community is reflected in new opportunities and new ambitions. Martha: 'Last year, young people, the sons and daughters of producers, received training on how to manage a cooperative; these skills will help us in the future.'
- A transformed community keeps sight of its origins and holds to its original vision. José Emilio Echavarría, president of the cooperative: 'The cooperative started like a young child who first begins to crawl, then attempts to walk and falls along the way. Then suddenly the child starts to run.' Fátima Ismael, director of Soppexcca: 'We're not just about bread for today, but also for tomorrow. But we don't just want bread, we want bread and honey and milk.'

In short, a community struggling to get to its feet has become a flourishing, dynamic one, working together with a clear goal and with much to look forward to.



Conclusion

Return to Acts 2 and the picture of a transformed community in verses 46-47 which is one of joyful celebration ('glad and generous hearts, praising God and having the goodwill of all the people'). This is the beginning of a community into which the once-blind man was received (John 9:38), one which is based on acceptance and trust. And it's a model for present-day communities such as Los Alpes.

Reasons to celebrate:

- communities that welcome people in and enable them to play a part in their development
- communities that are based on mutual trust – together people are moving out of poverty
- the worldwide Christian community that through prayer and action becomes a crucial part of the transformation of poor communities.

The message of John 10:10. 'Having life abundantly' suggests a new community where life is affirmed, not denied; where people flourish. Ask the congregation to pray for communities across the developing world, and so become part of the work of transformation.

This article is a set of sermon notes from the Christian Aid website.