

“Winners and Losers”

A sermon for Christian Aid Week

Sunday Bible Readings: Acts 10:44-48; 1 John 5:1-6; John 15:9-17

There's been a lot about “winners and losers” this week... Most obviously you might think about the General Election – indeed on Friday morning “Winners and Losers” was one of the headlines on a web-site as the results were being analysed. But we've also remembered another battle this week, and one that we might see as even more significant. Seventy years ago, on 8th May 1945, it was announced that the war in Europe was over – VE Day. There were some very obvious winners and losers... The Allies had won, and the forces of evil represented by Hitler and the Nazis had lost. Some will remember the joyful celebrations!

The realisation that, come the end of the war, there were going to be winners and losers, had prompted the Churches in Britain to do some hard thinking. In 1942, in the darkest days of the war, the British Council of Churches was formed, and one of the first things they did was to set up a **‘Christian Reconstruction in Europe’** committee – the CRE – whose purpose was to build a vision of a world without war, a vision that could see beyond “winners and losers” when the time came. On this equivalent Sunday in 1945, CRE organised a collection in churches around the country and raised a significant sum of money to help European churches meet the needs of their people, including our former enemies.

Within a couple of years the work of CRE was widened as it supported and provided relief for the 75,000 displaced Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza. Recognising this different role, **‘Christian Reconstruction in Europe’** changed its name to **‘Inter-Church Aid’** and gradually became a significant agent in responding to crises around the world on behalf of the Church in Britain.

Why the history lesson? Because, in 1964 the name was changed again: from **‘Inter-Church Aid’** to **‘Christian Aid’**. The ending of the war 70 years ago is related to the beginning of the organisation whose work we remember today in this **Christian Aid Week**. The vision those Christians had in the 1940s was that the Gospel of Jesus requires of his followers that they offer support and aid where events have led to human suffering – regardless of who those people are. To put it another way, where there are winners and losers, in God's name we have a particular responsibility to make sure that all are cared for and offered help. The readings for this week offer us some help as we think about this important aspect of being Christians in the world.

The part of the **‘Acts of the Apostles’** for this Sunday's reading relates to winners and losers in a rather particular way. The early Christians were, as we know, Jewish men and women, and their religion taught them that they were God's chosen people. I'm speaking very loosely here, but *they* were, if you like, the winners, and the Gentiles were the losers. What those first Christians discovered – and the verses preceding the reading tell us about this – was that God didn't see it like that at all! God loved the Gentiles just as much, and the Holy Spirit of God was poured out on them too. It's a reminder to us that, although we might identify people as winners or losers, in God's sight we are all winners! That must certainly change the way we see other people – whoever they are.

In the reading from the **‘First letter of John’** there is talk of “conquering the world” and of “victory”. So who are the winners here? It is faith, we discover, that conquers the world, and the ones who have the victory are those who believe that Jesus is the Son of God. John has explained that this believing in Jesus as the Christ is about being “born of God”, and this has some very clear consequences: chiefly it means that we love God; and if we love God, we will love God's children. The world is conquered by this love, and the victory is that the love of God is shed abroad through the lives of God's people. When that happens effectively, all are winners...

And then **John's Gospel** also implies that there are winners. Here the winners, again we might suppose, are those who are “chosen”. “You did not choose me but I chose you,” says Jesus. So clearly those who aren't chosen are the losers... Yes? No! that's not what Jesus is saying at all.

Jesus is saying that we should never think that following him makes us rather special or better than others. If we are following Jesus it is all about God's grace – about the work of God in us. We are merely responding to the life of God that we discover in ourselves. It's not about winners and losers – it's about the fact that God's Spirit in us is given so that we can be God's friends in the world and bear fruit to God's glory – fruit that will last.

The difficult and challenging part of this is also made clear in John's Gospel. If we speak about being those who believe in Jesus, who are called by him to live out and show his love in the world, we have to get our heads round what Jesus says to his followers: "No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends." This was to be the way of Jesus – and we have to work out the implications for our lives. What needs to be understood is that, in the eyes of the world at least, this is the way for "losers". Jesus was quite clearly a loser: he had set out a revolutionary programme for the Kingdom of God, and ended up being crucified on a cross in Jerusalem. A loser – "big-time".

So there is an irony in all of this. We are called to be those who conquer the world, "winners", by making God's love real – and yet the way to do this is to become "losers" and, in the way of Jesus, give up our lives. "Deny yourselves," says Jesus. "Take up your cross and follow me." We know, of course, that this is typically the way of God's Kingdom. The Kingdom of God turns upside-down the way of the world. Those who are thought to be winners in the world can be the losers in God's Kingdom. Those who are thought to be the losers in the world can be the winners in God's Kingdom. In truth, the winners are those who "take up their cross" and follow in the way of Jesus.

So how does this translate into our daily lives as Christian people – as the followers of the Jesus who appeared to many to be a "loser"? Let's begin where we are today, at the start of Christian Aid Week. As the followers of Jesus, we commit ourselves to identifying those who are seen as the losers in the world today:

- it doesn't take much effort to identify those who suffer as a result of war, or persecution, famine, flood, or earthquake – and we can respond by being generous in our giving.
- it takes much more effort to face up to the causes of some of these problems: and Christian Aid (and other similar agencies) help us to be better informed about the part we can play in alleviating some of those problems.

The need to combat climate-change is one particular example and our recognition of those who are losing out because of our lifestyle is a matter of the utmost urgency. There are plenty of "winners" in the world who don't want their lifestyle to be challenged, and who will tell us that we're being conned by those who urge us to take action now. We have to be open to what the way of Jesus, the one who gave his life for his friends, might be saying to us.

And it's not all about problems far away from here. It's on our doorstep too. We have probably taken trouble this week to think carefully about how we vote so that those who are seen as the "losers" in our hugely privileged country are respected and supported and cared for. We haven't just thought about our own comfort and voted out of self-interest to preserve the privileges of the "winners". In the spirit of Jesus we've tried give expression to "laying down our life for our friends".

And the work continues... Here in Codsall we are called to notice those who might be thought of as "losers" – but who are in fact beloved children of God, just like us – and, in the Spirit of Jesus, make sacrifices for those friends. This is hugely challenging and we are aware that there are pressures that tempt us to think we can't or shouldn't get involved.

A war ended 70 years ago... The battle for us to continue winning today is the victory of God's love in the world.

Keith Elbourne