



## A talk and a sermon – Commitment for Life service, 24<sup>th</sup> October 2021

**Readings:** Psalm 126; Mark 10.46-52; Jeremiah 31.7-9

This morning's service is our annual opportunity to focus upon *Commitment for Life*, which is the United Reformed Church's main way of working for justice. *Commitment for Life* concentrates upon four particular places in the world – Bangladesh, Central America, Israel and the Occupied Territories, and Zimbabwe. It's also key to the URC's support of both *Christian Aid* and *Global Justice Now*, formerly the *World Development Movement*.

Through *Commitment for Life*, Downing Place Church has a specific interest in Bangladesh, which is between the north east of India and Myanmar (Burma). Over the next hour we'll think of life there and pray with its people.

### Sharing Together

*Commitment for Life* is because life matters.

The best way to live life is to ensure life is good for others.

That's how Jesus lived, and died:

by spreading ideas and by doing things that made life good for others.

Think of how Bartimaeus's life was made better when he could see again.

(αναβλεψω - *again, see*)

In fact, he's often known as the *Man for Others*; the one who was there for others. c.f. Dietrich Bonhoeffer

He was even willing to die so that others could have life more completely.

It's about his commitment for life.

One of the most famous verses about him puts it like this:

'I have come in order that you might have life, life in all its fullness.'

John 10.10

### Talk by Janet Bottoms

*We come now to a first-hand talk about Bangladesh, in which Janet Bottoms reflects upon what shapes life there. Janet sends her apologies for not being with us in person today. She is leading worship at Water Lane United Reformed Church in Bishop's Stortford. We are very grateful to Janet and Jess Uden who prepared this recording earlier in the week.*



Bangladesh was only born as a nation in 1971, the culmination of a period of divisions and violence, and major displacement on politico-religious lines, that surrounded and followed the end of British rule in India in 1947. When I was born the region was part of India. When I lived there as a child it was East Pakistan; and when my parents finally retired it became Bangladesh. This year it celebrated its fiftieth anniversary and has changed and developed much in that time, but clearly it is still, in many ways, the land I knew.

Much of Bangladesh is flat and watery. There is a hilly, tea-growing area in the north and the east - where it borders on Myanmar -. This is the part that received the Rohingya refugees, but the central and southern part of the country is a flat plane - at or below sea-level - and threaded by a number of great rivers and their tributaries. These carry water down from the Himalayan hills and end in a vast delta area on the northern rim of the Bay of Bengal.

Life is largely ruled by these rivers, but also by the coming of the monsoon, which lasts for approximately four months from June to October. Under torrential monsoon rain the rivers can cause devastating floods - and when a tropical cyclone gathers speed up the Bay of Bengal, that, also, bring floods and destruction. This is the area of Bangladesh I knew as a child. The largest town was **Barisal**, the region was called **Barisal** District and my father called it "Waterland". The mission compound was just outside Barisal, consisting of a church, a small cluster of houses, and two boarding schools for boys and girls respectively, but my fondest memories are of the District.

According to a local saying "*paddy [rice], river and canal are the three things that make Barisal*", and at that time, at least, it was true. Longer distances were by paddle steamer on the river, and shorter ones by smaller boats along the canals. Over the centuries, silt brought down by the rivers had formed banks, some of them wide enough for villages to be built on them, and between them lay a jigsaw of low, saucer-like fields - dry during the winter and early spring but flooded by the monsoon rains.

It was a major rice growing area. The rice grew through the water in the monsoon season, getting taller as the water level rose. If we were visiting a village at that season we could cross the fields in a small boat - the rice stalks bowing to each side and then rising again as the boat passed through them - but once they had grown to full height - ready for harvesting when the water went down - we were confined to paths along the top of the embankments.

Sometimes my father would take me on the luggage carrier on the back of his bike but we would often have to stop in order to cross a small canal or creek. Then he would have to carry his bike over whatever bridge there might be while I trotted behind. ( Often the bridge was no wider than a single bamboo-plank- and with no handrail.) Before the monsoon began, when the land had become dry and baked hard it was possible to cycle across the fields, bumping crazily over the cracked earth. I was thankful for the cushion under me.

A village would often consist of four or five houses - more, on the larger islands or riverbank - with houses built of walls of plaited straw and thatched. There would be a few livestock and some small vegetable patches, and some people extended the available space by weaving together the long stems of the water hyacinth to make little rafts. These rafts were chained to posts on the island and rose and fell with the water level. Once I saw a cow standing on one.

In my memory the people were always cheerful and welcoming - as a white child I was something of a curiosity - but they lived very close to the margin, dependent for any cash on the rice and vegetables they could sell in the Barisal market or on some small domestic industries. Their main food was also rice and vegetables, though this could be augmented sometimes by fish. I remember seeing men standing on the riverbank casting their nets - a beautiful sight as the net spread wide in the air before floating slowly down to the water - but whether they caught anything would depend on the state of the river. If the rice crop failed, they would soon be in difficulties.

I remember, once, a man arriving from one of the villages to say that his rice - which had been growing promisingly - had suddenly turned black and rotten, no one knew why. There was no food in the village and no work and what was my father going to do about it? At that point the newly founded charities such as Oxfam and Christian Aid had not yet been heard of in Barisal. Missionaries, however, have to be inventive as well as good beggars so the immediate crisis was solved - but what my father saw as almost more important was to find out why the crop had failed. It turned out that the disease was confined to fields where the rice stubble had not been burned off after harvesting - a traditional practice that had been neglected, perhaps because people had forgotten the reason for it, which appeared to be to prevent a certain parasitic worm infesting the roots of the newly planted rice.

For good or bad, then, water was all around, and life both dependent on - and periodically devastated - by it. Even from these brief memories, I think you can see what the needs and problems of the new nation were likely to be - subsistence farming and overcrowded cities, poor communications, lack of education and technical knowledge, natural disasters from rivers and sea - and perhaps most of all, the volatile and changing weather patterns that threatened centuries of traditional ways of living.

## Sermon: Revd. Nigel Uden

The emphasis upon water in what Janet tells us illustrates that water is one of life's **realities**. Bangladesh is a place of water, characterised by those rivers, with transport systems that must navigate the waterways, and defined by water's notorious unreliability, as deluges of too much are followed by droughts of too little.

Not only is water a reality. It is also one of life's **necessities**. 'Too much' and 'too little' pose difficulties of equal challenge. Only this year, the monsoon rains have caused chaos for the 900,000 Rohingya refugees living in the hilly, muddy camps at Cox's Bazar, on the southeast coast. Day after day, reports narrated how the rains continued, with drains becoming streams and streams becoming raging torrents.<sup>1</sup> Similarly, drought, though less common, is severe in its impact, particularly upon the subsistence economy that has rice at its heart. Statistics show that rainfall has dropped markedly in the past thirty years – from 1700cm per annum in the 1980s to just 700cm per annum a decade later.<sup>2</sup> That's tricky for paddies.

Such are the circumstances to which *Commitment for Life* seeks to respond, with its trio of emphases: 'life-giving faith, defiant hope and generous love.' This programme, which for more than 25 years has been fundamental to the way that the URC has enabled local churches to live out the Gospel, recognises that Christian witness has to be characterised by generosity in the face of need, defiance in the face of despair, and unshakeable determination to deal in life rather than in death. What small local churches could not achieve on their own is possible by the joint effort of *Commitment for Life*. The quarter of a million pounds raised by the URC last year really does make a difference, and Downing Place Church's element, in excess of eleven thousand pounds, is something to be deeply grateful we are able to do. I so honour each and every person who has made it possible.

When we read the Hebrew and the Christian scriptures, it is clear that the God they reveal is committed to life. God is the source of life in the first place, and the renewer of life when it is distorted. And often the preferred image for that restoration involves water.

- We began this morning with those words from Psalm 126, where the restoration of fortune, be it after natural disaster or political turmoil, referred to the watercourses in the Negeb. (126.4) Maybe it's offering us the image of how the desert blooms, albeit momentarily, after renewing rain.
- And we read of how Jeremiah heard God promise to bring the people back from the misery of exile to the exuberance of homecoming. And again, one of the metaphors is water: '... I will let them walk by brooks of water.' (31.9)
- And when the saving work of Jesus Christ is being summed up in Revelation, it's represented as a 'river flowing with the water of life'. (22.1)

Time and time again, we find water - so dominant and influential in Bangladesh, and so vital to life - as an everyday image to represent the everyday reality of God's commitment to offer abundant life for all people, through the living, and dying and rising of Jesus Christ. You see, that is why we can sing that our cup overflows; moreover, that is the overflowing cup which we have to offer as our commitment for life. Let it be so always; indeed, for life.

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<sup>1</sup> See the website of Concern USA. Available <https://www.concernusa.org/story/2021-bangladesh-floods-coxs-bazar/> Accessed 20<sup>th</sup> October 2021

<sup>2</sup> See the website, Banglapedia, the National Encyclopedia of Bangladesh Available at <https://en.banglapedia.org/index.php/Drought> Accessed 20<sup>th</sup> October 2021