**A picture containing clipart

Description generated with high confidenceSermon: Life-giving faith, Defiant Hope, Generous Love.**

The passages of scripture we have heard today, read to us and in the video, root the current Commitment for Life strapline firmly in God’s Word. Life-giving faith, Defiant Hope and Generous Love are however much more than a strapline, they are concepts which lie at the heart of the Gospel and our response to it, they are concepts which tell us something about God in whose image and likeness we are made and they are concepts which govern our discipleship as we ‘walk the way, living the life of Jesus today.’

The verses of Ezekiel 34 that form the reading describe God’s action in taking initiative and showing compassion. The people have been scattered in the exile. Now God promises to act as a shepherd, a king. God will seek out the exiles and bring them back. God will not wait for them to return, but will search out the exiles. God will provide life for the exiles. In the past they have turned from God and forgotten God’s ways and that has resulted in their experience of exile. Now it is time for them to be restored and return to a relationship with God who seeks them out, cares and heals. God will provide justice for them by confronting those who have failed them. God says’ I will look for those who are lost, bring back those who wander off, bandage those that are hurt, and heal those who are sick; but those that are fat and strong, I will destroy, because I am a shepherd who does what is right. So our reading from Ezekiel speaks to us about the nature of God, who takes the initiative, shows compassion and seeks justice on behalf of the weakest and most vulnerable.

The words of Micah will be familiar to many of us, particularly the concluding verses which respond to the question, ‘What does the Lord require of you?’ The passage has been concerned with the offerings that people should bring when they come to worship. The best calves, endless streams of olive oil and even a first born child are suggested as appropriate offerings but the people are told what it is that God wants. It is ‘to do what is just, to show constant love and to live in humble fellowship with our God.’ The simplicity of the answer belies its complexity and challenge. In our 24/7 global community it is often difficult to know what is just, questions of justice are rarely black and white, situations are suffused with shades of grey as we hear and need to balance competing demands from a variety of interest groups and parties. If Ezekiel tells us something about the nature of God who shows compassion and seeks out justice on behalf of the weakest and most vulnerable then if we are to follow Micah’s advice and live in humble fellowship with our God perhaps our response to justice issues is to do the best we can for the poorest and most vulnerable in our world?

The reading from 1st John is a celebration of love, love we experience from God, love we share within the faith community but most importantly love which leads us out to beyond what is known and familiar. It all begins with God’s love. In case we ever forget this basic, essential fact of our faith, 1 John makes it crystal clear that God is the source and the definition of love. 1 John emphasizes that God’s love is not some abstract concept. It is passion expressed in action. God made love real and present by sending Jesus to live among us and to die for us. God continues to show us love through Jesus’ life-giving presence among us. If we love others as God has loved us, there can be no boundaries. God’s love, made visible and present in Jesus, is the source for the love we share with others. Jesus ignored the limits that religious communities imposed. He ate and talked with people whom the religious leaders had rejected as heretics, as sinful, as filthy and despicable. He touched people who were considered untouchable and welcomed people whom everyone else had kicked out. His harshest words were reserved not for the impure, but for unloving, self-righteous people who saw some of God’s children as beneath their attention and certainly as unworthy of their love. If Jesus shows us what God’s love is like, then there can be no doubt how far our love for others must extend: to every single human being, each person is our neighbour in this global community and there can be no limits on the nature and quality of our love either.

Life giving faith, defiant hope, generous love. Through Commitment for Life we have the opportunity to turn the words of the strapline into a way of living in solidarity with some of the world’s poorest people, people like Shimu who lives in Bangladesh with her husband and children.

In 2015, Shimu joined a Christian Aid and Traidcraft project that offered to train women to grow tea on small plots; it helped them with saplings and an initial investment to prepare the land. Shimu was hesitant at first – nobody in her family had any experience of growing tea – but as her saplings grew well, she began to see results. The first time Shimu harvested the tea, she sold the leaves for 700 Taka (around £6) – enough to encourage her to keep going. Now Shimu’s tea business is properly up and running. From April to September 2017, she sold 48,000 Taka of tea leaves (around £410), as well as cultivating and selling saplings which are worth more. The business makes a yearly profit of around £2,500 – it’s been enough to buy another small plot of land, raise chickens and cows, and repair her house. Before, Shimu’s family could never afford to celebrate festivals like Eid and New Year, but this year they celebrated together as a family. Shimu says: “Now I feel proud of my success.” In future, Shimu plans to build a house in brick and wants to expand her tea garden. She also wants to buy two cows and save money for her children’s higher education.

Shimu’s life, and the lives of her family, her neighbours and community, has been transformed through Commitment for Life. She now has hope that she can make a better future for her family and children, she can now practice her faith, offering what she wants to give to God, and she has confidence in her herself that she can do these things for herself and her family.

Shimu’s story and those of millions like her touch our hearts but often are all too quickly forgotten in our news, perhaps even in our worship and prayers. In recent months our news has been dominated by Brexit, the quest for a deal and disagreements between politicians about the direction of travel the UK should take in relation to the European Union and seeking trade deals with other nation states. As Brexit day comes and goes, our response to Shimu is to keep her story, the the story of millions of others, alive, by acknowledging that the God in whom we have faith gives life to the vulnerable; by speaking with defiant hope to politicians and society in general in favour of the weakest; by being generous in our loving response of finance, time and energy; by reminding ourselves and others that we are all interconnected in God’s world and what each one of us does affects my brother and sister in every part of the planet and the planet itself.

This is our Commitment for Life. This is how God calls us and invites us to ‘walk the way, living the life of Jesus today’. This is life-giving faith, defiant hope, generous love. Amen.