I am not easily shocked, but I was shocked by a comment in a recent article by Matthew Parris. I was so shocked that I actually thought I had misunderstood him. But no, I had read it correctly. He wrote this, “Let’s acknowledge and confront the strongest argument against assisted dying. As (objectors say) the practice spreads, social and cultural pressure will grow on the terminally ill to hasten their own deaths so as “not to be a burden” on others or themselves. I believe this will indeed come to pass. And I would welcome it.” (Matthew Parris, The Times, 30/03/24)

Yes, he would like to see those who are terminally ill feel some pressure on themselves to end their lives so as not to be a burden to others. I find this quite extraordinary, although perhaps I shouldn’t be surprised. Although a liberal thinker Parris has been controversial previously.

The arguments for and against assisted dying are complex, medically, legally, spiritually and culturally. For most of us the risk of vulnerable people feeling a sense of duty to end their lives is an argument against allowing assisted dying. Parris seems to believe there is an inevitability about all of this and that it would be good for people to feel this pressure.

Yes, end of life care can be expensive in resources, time and in its emotional impact on those around the person who is terminally ill, whether it is at home or an institution. But so is a lot of care whether it is for babies and children, people with disabilities, people with complex physical or mental conditions. Whatever, each of them is a valuable human being created in the image of God, and loved by God. We are not created to be independent beings. We are not created to deliver more profit than cost. We are created to love God and neighbour and to be loved by God and neighbour. We are fundamentally interdependent. We are all burdens to others one way or another. At times we will give more than we receive, and at other times we will receive more than we give. Often the most vulnerable are the ones doing the most giving. Those involved in the care of the terminally ill will tell you of what they receive from those they care for. At no point should anyone feel that they are a burden and that it is their duty to end their life. Yes, there will be, there are those, who want to end their own life – and we can’t explore that area now. But no one should ever feel that because they are terminally ill, they are a burden and should end their life.

The actor Liz Carr has also recently flagged up the deep fear of many people with significant disabilities that if you introduce assisted dying for one group of people it will gradually be applied to more and more people.

As interdependent people we care for one another. Care is at the heart of what it means to be human. This is at the heart of the whole Judeo-Christian tradition, and it is expressed fundamentally in Jesus. His incarnation, ministry, death, resurrection and ascension are a decisive expression of God’s care for humankind. We are loved children of God; we are not a burden to be cast aside.

Commenting on the famous parable of the sheep and the goats, the theologian James H. Cone interprets the passage as taking aim at the idea that caring for others is some kind of “added extra” in life. On the contrary, Cone says, Jesus is telling us that caring is a fundamental part of what it is to be human.

Today is Florence Nightingale’s birthday, she was born 204 years ago today. Inspired by her faith she devoted herself to caring for those who were vulnerable. As the plaque in our north aisle reminds us, she is revered as the founder of modern nursing. As well as physically tending the sick and the ill she used statistics and graphs to improve the care people received and in so doing effectively created a new...
profession. By doing this she was actively and effectively involved in love of God and neighbour. She certainly wasn’t worrying about who was a burden. The nursing profession of our own day continues to a living expression of care for those who are vulnerable whether briefly or in the long term.

In today’s Gospel Jesus prays that his followers will be in the world, he sends them into the world, but he also prays that they be protected from the dangers of the world. For us that can be swallowing values widely held in society but which are contrary to the gospel and to the values of the kingdom of God. How often do we witness Christians saying things that are in stark contrast to the teaching of Jesus? And there is nothing new there. We were reminded in the passage from Acts about the election of Matthias to replace the one who spectacularly let Jesus down 2000 years ago. And still it happens.

Thank goodness for Christian Aid Week, an annual reminder about the plight of so many vulnerable people around the world, and an opportunity for us to respond to that need. And like Florence Nightingale, Christian Aid doesn’t just respond to the first deserving cause but uses detailed research and statistics to make its care effective.

This year Christian Aid is promoting its work in Burundi, an African nation little bigger than Wales tucked in between the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Tanzania and Rwanda, but with a population of about thirteen million people, four times more than Wales. It is a mountainous and poor country.

Christian Aid is telling the story of Aline Nibogora whose life radiates the persistence of love through the most challenging situations. Aline’s love for her children and for her community is evident in all she does. She expresses her love for Jesus in all she does and has held on to faith, hope and love even when extreme poverty pushed her to the brink of survival. Aline is a devoted mother who does all she can for her three children despite losing them temporarily due to the breakup of an abusive marriage. With help from Christian Aid she was able to take part in a community workshop and develop the skills to set up a grocery business. She was then involved in establishing a Village Savings and Loans Association where community members support one another to meet their needs. She is building a home for her family with whom she was reunited. She cooks and provides meals for her family and neighbours. She has bought solar panels to give her children light to complete their schoolwork so that they can go to university. She is a leader in her community and is supporting many other families. She embodies love and care in all she does, and by donating to Christian Aid we enable others to do the same.

Today as we celebrate the risen and ascended Christ taking our humanity into the heart of God, we reject any attempt to see anyone as a burden, and we rejoice that we are dependent on one other, created to love and care. Let us pray that inspired by people like Florence Nightingale and Aline Nibogora, and renewed by the Holy Spirit, we too may be channels of God’s love in the world into which we too have been sent.

The Revd Michael Futers,

Acting Precentor.