

A Sermon for the 80th anniversary of Christian Aid 18th May 2025

(transcribed from the service livestream: <https://youtu.be/BJgfLT8CdTw?t=2122>)

Rowan Williams

A few days ago, we were assured on very high authority, that the new 'norm' for international aid would be 0.3% of our Gross National Product. The 'new norm' and the 'new normal': how often have we heard those terms in the last twenty years? We're told again and again that after such and such a crisis, after such and such a tragedy, things cannot go back to what we assumed once was 'normal'. In case you forgotten there was a financial crisis in 2008, and we were firmly told that things would 'never be the same again'. And in case you've forgotten, we had a pandemic a few years ago, in the course of which we were several times told that 'nothing would ever be the same again'; we were in a 'new normal'. A cynic might say that the new normal is talking about the new normal.

But what do we mean when we talk like this? At the very least, at the most trivial and ordinary level, to talk a new norm is to way we can't expect - we can't take for granted - what once we did. What seemed obvious is no longer obvious. We have to adjust our expectations and we have to control and manage our hopes.

But the word 'normal' is a weasel word. It can mean what's *usual* - what we have learned to expect, as a matter of course - or it can mean something a bit more serious: it can mean a 'norm' in the sense of something by which we *judge* what happens. It can mean a *standard*. And if we're saying that the new norm for our international life, in the sense of a new standard, is the new level of anxious and penny-pinching withdrawal of our concern for the rest of the world, we have a problem.

As Christians, we believe that the norm by which we live yesterday, today and for ever, is the wisdom of God. That wisdom which holds all things in balance and mutuality. That wisdom in which our life is real only when it is shared. The wisdom in which we live, the wisdom incarnate in Jesus Christ, is a pattern of life in which the giving of life is fundamental. And to choose such wisdom, and to live by such a norm, is not a *lifestyle*, choice but a *life* choice. Not for nothing in Hebrew scripture does Moses say to the people, in the name of God, 'Today I set before you life and death'.

So when we hear about a new norm and a new normal, we had better listen carefully and with discrimination. And we had better ask ourselves and our society what indeed we take as *normative*, what is standard, what is it by which we choose to live. Not simply as a matter of lifestyle but as a matter of life.

Eighty years ago, Christian Aid was founded in a period where many people across the world were determined to challenge what seemed to be normal, to challenge expectations: the expectations of mutual defensiveness and hostility, the expectations of discrimination and disadvantage. As we were reminded just an hour or so ago by Patrick [Watt, CEO of Christian Aid], it's an age when people put together not only Christian Aid, but also the institutions by which the post-war order would live: the institutions of justice and participation; the idea that there was something to which people could appeal in protest against violence and injustice.

There was indeed a new norm to be discovered, a new standard by which the lives of individuals and national communities might be judged. A norm which was not just a matter of what we might expect on the basis of the recent past, a past of bloodshed and injustice, but a norm – a standard – rooted in a deeper and more lasting vision, a vision in which we might have hope because it didn't depend on our realizing it all the time, but was there guiding and nourishing us, day by day and year by year. And when we speak of the weakening or the ending of the post-war consensus and the emergence of the new normal, we need to be concerned, and we need to ask those very fundamental questions: by what do we live, and by what do we ask to be judged?

If normality, in the sense of the standard by which we live, the source from which we draw our inspiration, if our normality is to be defined in terms of what prevails in the world, and nothing more, we are (to paraphrase St Paul) of all people the most to be pitied. We are trapped. Because this new norm, this new normality, is a world in which it seems we have replaced one focal idea with another. The focal idea that 'I am only safe if my neighbour is safe' with the new normality of 'I am only safe if my neighbour is frightened'.

Is not that latter point that casts light on so much of the world we're in? The constantly unfolding tragedy in Gaza rests on the idea that I am safe if my neighbour is frightened. The panic that can be worked up so readily against minorities in so many countries rests on the same thing: I am safe if my neighbour is frightened. The patterns of war and rivalry, transactional international diplomacy of the kind unfolding around us day by day, the basic paradigm is that my neighbour must be frightened for me to be safe, and my neighbour must be unfree so that I may be free.

'If your enemies are hungry, feed them. If they are thirsty, give them something to drink.' There is the normality that our faith points to. A normality in deepest tension with what is now usual, normal, in the sense of tragically predictable. And so Christian Aid, through these decades, and for decades to come, is and will be committed to challenging what's usual, to challenging expectations in the name of not what is common, expected, predicted, but in the name of what *is*, what is *real*, and what is *life-giving*. The harmony of a universe where it is possible for life to be shared. The life-giving possibilities of reconciliation and of justice. That is what we are invited to live by. Not a lifestyle choice, but a choice of life rather than death. Because if we do live by the principle that for me to be safe my neighbour must be afraid, we are condemning ourselves to perpetual fear. I will always be afraid that my neighbour isn't afraid *enough*. And to be sprung from that trap by the promise and hope of reconciliation – that, surely, is the gospel in its essence: to be sprung from the trap of fear.

Perfect love casts out fear, says our scripture. And love, along with faith and hope, is intrinsically opposed to fear. If we want to live without fear, then we must learn the true new norm, the norm of the gospel, the norm of generosity, of shared life: everything that teaches us that our safety, our life, our flourishing, is bound up with the good of the neighbour. And that if we fail to see that we condemn ourselves as we condemn the neighbour, to terror, to butchery, to constant rivalry, to unceasing war.

It would be good, in many ways, to be able to pray today, as we've perhaps prayed at previous anniversaries of Christian Aid, that Christian Aid will do itself out of a job one day. That the norm by which we live, and the hope which we breathe, which we drink in, which nourishes us and keeps us going – that that hope will somehow transmit itself into the world in which we live. We may very well want to pray that in another 80 years there will be no need for Christian Aid or any such organisation.

Don't hold your breath. But to know that we *could* pray that, and that at some level of our hearts we may be praying that, is to know that we are indeed truly committed to a standard, a norm, a reality of interactive life, of self-giving life, of what theologians call *kenotic* life, self-emptying life – that is what we must live by, because that is where life is to be found. Without that, there is only fear. Without that, there is only violence. Can we believe that that is indeed a *norm* not vulnerable to the changes of geopolitics and the changes of moral fashion, but the wellspring of renewal, day after day?

Listening to those words about new normality and new norms, it was hard not to be reminded of the title of the book by the novelist Jeanette Winterson about her upbringing: 'Why be happy when you could be normal'? Why not accept what everybody seems to be content with? Why not stop being upset, discontented, with the way we are? Why not settle with the endless unfinished business of Israel and Palestine, of Russia and Ukraine, of India and Pakistan? Why not, in the brutal terms we so often use these days, just get used to it? The answer is simple: that is to opt for unreality, for untruth, for fear, and self-destruction. That is to opt for a lie. And any language that speaks of a new norm, in the sense of a new standard by which we can live, ignoring that truth, commits us to a great, corporate, global lie.

Christian Aid has sought, year after year, to nail that lie for what it is. It's not out of business yet, and naming the lies of selfishness, the lies of violence, is something which we are not going to stop needing any time soon. And our hope is not that as a matter of fact in 80 years we'll be out of business, our hope is that we will be kept fresh in that vision, that we will be kept alive in our faith and our trust and our confidence that the world is not normally, normatively, a place of conflict and exclusion.

May God keep us faithful to that normality which is God's own wisdom. May God keep us faithful to the discontent with what we can expect and assume on the basis of what prevails in our world. May God keep us faithful to the apparent impossibility of a new world when I know that I will live when my neighbour lives, my neighbour will live when I live. That my task is not to keep my neighbour frightened, dispossessed, at arms' length, to but find and create a world in which together we can share promise and share justice. May God keep us fresh in that vision and commitment, for however long it takes. Jesus says to St Peter at the end of the fourth gospel: 'If it is my will that he tarry until I come, what is that to you?' If we have to go on doing this until the end of the world, so be it. But it is worth it, because it is the truth, and it is life, and there is no other.