

On the ine

A Longer Read: Courage in the Face of Persecution

An extract from the Morning Prayers at Sherborne Girls, 25th November 2020, by Jenny Nelson, who writes: "It was humbling and a privilege to accept an invitation from our Chaplain, Revd Katie Windle, to speak in Morning Prayers on November 25, 2020. This presentation was written in collaboration with Sixth Formers Amara and Harriet, and delivered together for the whole school. The presentation followed an item from a Sixth Form Choir of 'Green Grow'th the Holly'."

'This morning's prayers are about **Courage in the Face of Persecution**, about lifting up those who are brought low, wherever that may be. Now that can of course be locally in Sherborne and Yeovil, but almost anywhere. For this morning we are drawn to interpret this on a global landscape.

Hearing of those fleeing from so many parts of the world, from Syria or Sudan, the global refugee crisis cannot have failed to move or even provoke you.

The United Nations say that nearly 80 million people, or 1 percent of humanity, now qualify as refugees, uprooted at the end of 2019 after fleeing wars or persecution, a record figure capping a tumultuous decade of displacement.

The UN Refugee agency say the figure rose by some 9 million from the year earlier and is close to double the 41 million recorded a decade ago, despite Covid-19 restrictions slowing down movement. The Sudan and South Sudan are two of the countries in the top 10 list of refugees displaced amid Covid 19 - internally displaced, as refugees within their own country or neighbouring countries. Before the independence of the South Sudan in 2011, Sudan was the biggest country in Africa with an Arabic / Muslim north and a Christian south.

These countries are blessed with natural resources, but after just a few years civil war broke out, followed by a period of democracy, another civil war, with ethnic and tribal fighting in all directions, resulting in some 10,000 deaths and 1.5 million people displaced and 4 million out of 11 million in danger of starvation. There is now a Peace Agreement monitored by the UN.

Here, we are often reminded to think of ourselves as part of a much larger community than a town, or a city, county, or Diocese (a geographical area in which a group of churches exists). Today we are going to focus on the Sudans.

To put this into context, early on some Wednesday mornings, I go into Salisbury Cathedral and share in lighting the Sudan's candle underneath their Window of Peace and Reconciliation. As one of the Sudan's Link and their affiliated Education Link Team, I pray and think about the situation facing the Sudanese people, including refugees who are displaced internally or in nearby countries, through famine, civil unrest, and at this moment through flooding from global warming, which has affected 16 out of 18 states: where half a million people have lost their homes.

The Sudan's link was set up in 1972. Unlike an aid agency, it is based on mutuality: where churches are separated by distance, but have a culture of caring for one another, in resources, experience, and practical help. Central to the Link is relationship-building and this is where the

work of the Education Team comes in – knowing that education can make an enormous difference for the Sudanese, especially with girls education and partnerships between Schools.

According to UNICEF, 49 percent of girls are missing out on primary education. As of 2017, a total of three million children have been left out of Sudan's education system, half of them being girls. In Sudan, the enrolment rate for girls in primary school is lower than that of boys, and there is a significant gap in literacy between boys and girls. There is a lack of [female teachers](#) in Sudanese schools which often creates a learning environment which may deter girls enrolling in school. Only 12 percent of South Sudan's teachers are female.

The challenges that we see certainly cause us to think about a number of hard questions, about equality and the way we become one humanity. We have to be aware that humanity is one family, and that the decisions we make in one corner of the world have a profound and lasting effect on what happens to our brothers and sisters in another part of the world.

Since we last spoke in an assembly, we have formed our sixth form group Friends of Omdurman Girls School, a group which supports a particular girls' school in Sudan. This has meaning with our pupils knowing of this place from their days living in Sudan.

Our Link with the Omdurman Girls' School has begun with exchanging letters, carried out to Sudan by Robert Hayward who visited us at School last February. He spoke with us about his voluntary work in the Sudans and for Christian Aid, and talked to us of his OBE, saying voluntary work is one of the most vital things anyone can do. This has helped us to begin a Link, which includes all of us, as the Friends of Omdurman Girls' School. There is huge possibility here for getting involved in some way, empowering the School as part of its culture to become involved, by building some experience through setting up projects, co-ordinating some letter-writing, and help with organising and co-ordinating an annual pupil-led fundraising event.

The Friends of Omdurman Girls' School is something which our Sixth Formers can become involved in, have a role in leading, and together and in collaboration with Sudan Link, decide where we can be most effective. Advocacy, courageous advocacy is a part of this, given we have opportunities to grow and develop ourselves, but with others too, learning about the challenges faced by those in this area of Sudan. We can play our part in bringing hope to others, helping to lift up others. And in so doing, lift up ourselves; lifting up our eyes to the needs of the world.

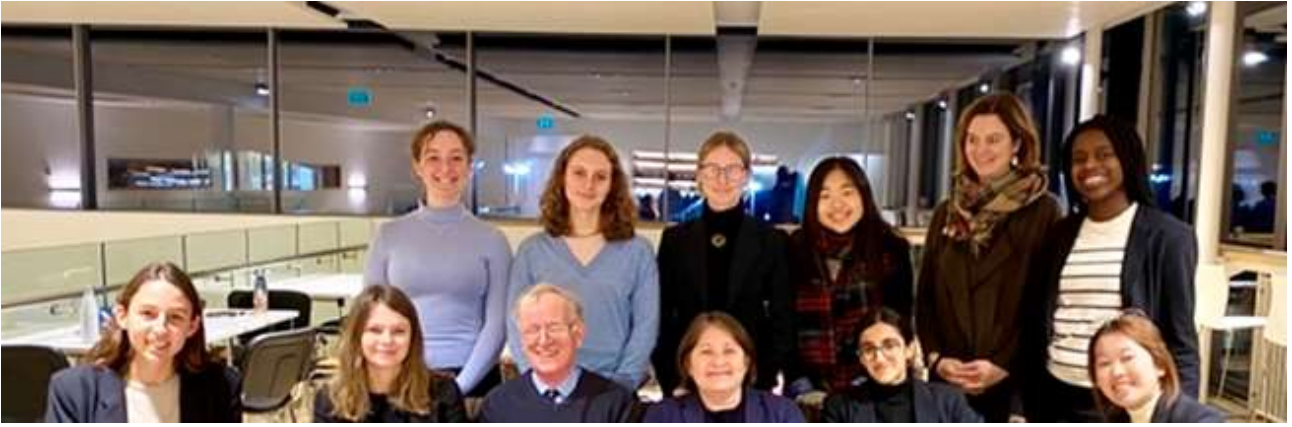
Essentially this is about bringing hope for others, in a sense bearing light and seeing a way of lifting others up out of poverty, out of persecution, and towards hope - to a place where education is for all. This is both a practical and a spiritual thing and it relates to the sense of hope we know at Advent which hints at God's light and the promise that whatever the darkness which besets people, the Sudanese and many others for that matter, this is scattered by God's light – it takes courage to offer an invitation to hope. What we actually find when we look closely at Advent and at the stories of Christmas, are the stories of humanity trying to work out their purpose.

So our purpose here, today, is to think about light and hope being made real for others.

Quote from Amara and Harriet:

“The Friends of Omdurman Girls' School is something we are all looking forward to becoming involved in. Together, we can decide where we can be most effective with our resources. Advocacy, courageous advocacy is a part of this, given we have opportunities to grow and develop ourselves, but with others too, learning about the challenges faced by those in this area of Sudan. We can play our part in bringing hope to others, helping to lift up others. And in so doing, lift up ourselves, lifting up our eyes to the needs of the world.”

Photo of Friends of Omdurman Girls' School, Sudan, taken at Sherborne Girls, February 2020:



Please do use any of the below, if you would, by way of a prayer.

The stories of the first Christmas are not much different from those in our news and in Morning Prayers today. The Christmas stories are of course set for the most part in unstable and dangerous regimes, regimes of persecution. Jesus was born in a country which was occupied by a conquering force. Within two years of his birth, Jesus, with his mother and father, were driven from their home in fear of persecution, and became refugees, escaping to the land of Egypt, according to Matthew's gospel account of the story. Remember, Jesus' mother in responding to the calling from God, had risked being cast out of her own society.

It won't be long now before we will hear the beginning of St John's gospel, 'in the beginning was the Word, the word was with God and the Word was God.' This is about light and life. The life, the new life of Christ as the light of the world that shines in the darkness of persecution. When we listen we hear of our responsibility to be those lights for other people, to carry those lights on behalf of other people who are suffering persecution. It takes courage to do this, courage in the face of persecution.

Thank you for listening today and for your support.

As we begin the count-down to Advent Sunday, and then Christmas, it is important we remember those facing challenges today.

Let us pray.

Lord, God – we give thanks for this day – for our being here together – for the sense of hope which we carry, so we may go out and bear hope for others.

We pray for the people of Sudan, for Omdurman Girls' School in Sudan, that they may be sustained in all hope today.

We pray for the peace of the world, for all suffering the effects of this pandemic, for those suffering any kind persecution, displaced from their homes and those needing courage.

Lord, God, we pray that you may bring a sense of peace and hope for all.

We pray for the life and heart of this school, for its traditions and its innovations, for those who have gone here before us, and those now who are linked with us. We pray for all staff, for those who work here at every tier of the school, for teams of pupils and staff, for our Headmistress, the Chaplain, for our families, for the whole community associated with and surrounding this school. Lord God, may you be with each one of us, this day and always.

Amen.