I've just come back from a week in South Africa with Christian Aid. I’m a lifelong supporter of their work with the poorest of the world’s poor, and was delighted to join them. But South Africa is a middle income country. Is Christian Aid still needed there?

We went to Kwa Zulu Natal, and joined the team at Church Land Program, Christian Aid’s partners. We met Thopelo, a community activist who lives in a tiny shack in a settlement on the edge of Durban. Over a thousand people live in this teeming hillside settlement, on an area of wasteland no bigger than a small football pitch. Huts and shacks are built almost on top of each other and fire is a constant danger. Electricity is taken directly from overhead pylons with dangerous live wires criss-crossing the site, causing hazards for the many children playing in the dirt. Two shipping containers have been fitted with three toilets and two showers each that everyone has to use. Staying overnight I heard stories of battles with police, of government hit squads seeking out and killing community leaders like Thopelo, and leaving women and children beaten and homeless. Time and again the people regroup and rebuild. They pray, they sing, they run classes for their children as they seek to live a fully human life. It’s the people’s struggle, but Church Land Programme comes alongside, listens and supports them in it.

We met Pastor Mavuso, a poor farmer as well as a minister, from a rural settlement away in the hills. The apartheid regime had forcibly removed his family from their ancestral lands, and relocated them to this remote, inhospitable area. But they had made it their own, scraping a living from the poor soil and arid landscape. Until two years ago when they woke to the sound of heavy machinery. Huge diggers were tearing the thin topsoil from their fields. Already reaching for the iron ore that lay below. Mining companies with offices and Directors in this country, had been sold the right to start open cast mining on the village farmland, without any warning, let alone consultation. Mavuso and his people were determined to resist. Church Land Programme came alongside, listened and supported them in their struggle. Mavuso prays and reads his bible. He believes in a
God of justice. He and his people won a high court injunction to stop the diggers in their tracks. At least for the moment.

I came away convinced that Christian Aid’s support for such partners, even in a middle income country, is vital. Poverty and injustice are everywhere. Apartheid has gone, but new elites have replaced old oppressors and the struggle goes on.

Today’s reading from Isaiah, printed in the pew sheet, speaks of righteous leadership, where princes rule with justice. They will be ‘like a hiding-place from the wind, like streams of water in a dry place, like the shade of a great rock in a weary land.’ I met our MP this week and it was good to get to know each other. After a while she asked, ‘Is there anything I can do to help you?’ It wasn’t a question I had expected. We can be so cynical of our politicians and leaders, but I felt the offer was genuine and heartfelt. She was there to serve. To find ways, perhaps with the church or whoever was interested in people’s struggles, to be ‘like the shade of a great rock in a weary land.’

Every community has its elites. They can use their power to serve others, or they can greedily grab what they can for themselves and resist and oppress those who stand in their way, as Isaiah makes plain in verses 5-7.

But in Hebrew thought the inner motivations of a person, and the outer behaviours and actions are always closely related. As Verse 8 says, those who ‘are noble plan noble things, and by noble things they stand.’ Their integrity frees others to see clearly, to hear and understand what is true, and best of all to speak well and truly. To find their own voice as we see in verses 3-4.

I used to be Chaplain for the Royal Shakespeare Company. Their great voice coach Cicely Berry died this year. I remember talking with her about her work, helping actors to speak clearly and well, and to communicate the words of Shakespeare’s plays to modern audiences. No easy task. Her main role, she said, was helping an actor to find their own voice. Not the voice of their character, or the voice of the play’s author, but their own authentic voice. To be clear who they were, and to speak clearly from that place. Inner and outer coming together in other words. Once that connection was made, everything else could follow.

As individual Christians and as a church we need to find our voice. It comes from within. From life in the Spirit. If we return to that source inside, each and every day, then our voice will be authentic, our actions sincere.
The Church at Philadelphia was sincere. A town in ancient Turkey addressed by the spirit of Jesus in today’s passage from Revelation. ‘I know you have little power’ he says, ‘yet you have kept my word of patient endurance.’ Like Thopelo and Mavuso in South Africa, these are the true pillars of the church. ‘Let anyone with an ear listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches.’

But the message to the church in Laodicea is very different. For you say, ‘I am rich, I have prospered, and I need nothing.’ The people were so sorted, so self-sufficient, they felt no need of God. They have land, fine clothes, pension and property. But the Spirit of Jesus says, ‘Do you not realise that you are wretched, pitiable, poor and naked?’ To know God is to know struggle and sacrifice. Uncomfortable, but true. ‘I counsel you to buy from me gold refined by fire, and white robes to clothe you.’ To be martyrs in other words, to follow Christ in the way of the cross. Harsh words and challenging calling. But as the Spirit says in verse 19, ‘I reprove and discipline those who I love.’

Today is Stir Up Sunday. We are supposed to be stirred up today to good works, and to lives of faith and sacrifice. Advent begins next Sunday. It’s the hardest time of the year to fast, and we are not called to be killjoys. But perhaps we need to listen to the Lord’s words of discipline and love. How can I best remember Thopelo and Mavuso amidst the festivities? How can I honour their struggle in the way I live this season? How can you? By generous giving perhaps, to Christian Aid or whoever; by going without things and fasting in private, even if office Christmas dinners need to be enjoyed; by coming to God in a disciplined quiet time of stillness and prayer each day of Advent, listening to what the Spirit has to say.

Verse 19 goes on, ‘Be earnest therefore, and turn yourselves around! Listen! I am standing at the door and knocking; if you hear my voice and open the door, I will come in to you and eat with you, and you with me.’

Like the householder coming home, Jesus comes to us, his church. We already belong to him, and he will share himself with us, as we share ourselves with him in worship and in prayer and in the breaking of bread. Jesus is coming to us, and in doing so, the passage suggests, Jesus is coming home. And so are we.

Listen! I stand at the door, and knock. If you hear my voice and if you open the Door, I will come in to you, and eat with you. And you with me.’

‘Let anyone who has an ear listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches.’