**This is day the Lord has made: let us rejoice and be glad! I rejoice to have the privilege of speaking here today.**

**I cherish the opportunity to invite you to meet members of ‘The courageous and compassionate church’ whom we meet during our work with the Humanitarian Aid Relief Trust (HART).**

**But first, may I briefly introduce myself - in case you are wondering why someone with the pretentious-sounding title of ‘Baroness’ is talking here today. All I ever say about myself is *‘I am a Nurse and a Social Scientist by intention – and a Baroness by astonishment!***

**I was the first Baroness I had ever met! It was quite a shock waking up in the morning and seeing a Baroness looking at myself out of the bathroom mirror! Becoming a Baroness means being appointed to the House of Lords: an enormous privilege. I prayed about how to use it. The message came that I could speak in Parliament as a ‘voice for the voiceless’ or for those who have voices but whose voices are not heard.**

**But it’s a far greater privilege to speak in the House of THE Lord: thank you very much for giving me this privilege today.**

**I established HART to provide aid and advocacy for victims of oppression and persecution who are not reached by other aid organisations for political or security reasons. We don’t only work with Christians: the Biblical mandate is to heal the sick, feed the hungry and speak for the oppressed – not just the Christian hungry and oppressed. For example, we are privileged to work with Muslims in Blue Nile State in Sudan and with Buddhists in Shan State in Burma. But the majority of our partners are Christians as Christians are suffering the most widespread persecution in our world today.**

**We work with local partners – who are heroes and heroines on frontlines of faith and freedom.**

**Please travel with me to meet just 4 of these heroes and heroines: there are many more but no time to hear them today.**

**First, to Burma (we use ‘Burma’ rather than ‘Myanmar’ because our local partners prefer this). War continues: we all hear about the Rohingya, whose suffering is horrific. But we don’t hear about the continuing suffering on the Eastern border where high intensity conflict is inflicted by the Burmese Army on the peoples in Shan and Kachin States, whom it is our privilege to visit and provide such support as we can. We also previously visited the Karen people who also suffered horrendously from attacks by the Burmese army. This is jungle terrain. When the Army shells the villages, homes burn like tinder. On one occasion we visited a village still burning from an attack by the Army and soldiers had run through, gratuitously shooting civilians. I met a lady called Ma Su, age 39, with a lovely smile. She was sheltering in someone else’s hut as her own home had been burnt and she had been shot by a soldier. When I asked what she felt about soldier who shot her, she replied:**

***‘I love him. The Bible says we should love our enemies, so of course I love him. He is my brother.’***

**Wow! That makes my spiritual stature feel microscopic!**

**Now to the historic Armenian land of Nagorno Karabakh. Armenia was the first nation to become Christian in 301. There are 4th century churches in Karabakh (which make this beautiful historic church here feel rather modern!). Stalin used ‘salami’ tactics of ‘divide and rule’. With these tactics he cut off part of Eastern Armenia – Nagorno Karabakh – and located it in Azerbaijan. When the USSR imploded, Azerbaijan took the opportunity to begin ethnic cleansing of the Armenians in Karabakh. They didn’t want to go. They had already lost Western Armenia in the 1915 Genocide. So they resisted: 150,000 Armenians against 7 million Azeris; hunting rifles against tanks; David against Goliath.**

**I used to count 400 Azeri GRAD missiles a day pounding onto the little capital city, Stepanakert. The Armenian Orthodox Bishop Parkev Martirossian stayed with his people throughout their suffering. I was there on the day when his home got a direct hit. Every morning, when the Grad shelling started, he would get up to pray. Not easy when there was no electricity, no, light, no heat – in temperatures of -20 degrees (making our current cold spell seem quite mild!). On that day, he got up to pray as usual and his home got a direct hit. A huge concrete slab lay on the bed where he would have been sleeping. A person truly saved by prayer!**

 **I visited him in the afternoon, in the smouldering rubble of his home, to express my sympathy. I also asked if he had a message for the church, for the world, as no-one knew what was happening in Karabakh. Standing there in the smoking ruins of his house, unprepared for such a request, he spontaneously gave a message I’ll never forget:**

***‘We praise God and thank Him that, after 70 years of Soviet Communism, we are free to have Bibles and to pray again, although we are having to pray in basements and cellars and on the field of battle, where we are having to defend our families against those who would destroy us*. [Then a challenge to us all]: *It’s not only the perpetrators of crime and evil who commit sin, but also those who stand by, seeing and knowing – and who do not condemn it or try to avert it*. [Then an amazing message of love – the truly compassionate church in the midst of persecution]. *But we must never forget we have a Gospel of love: whatever evil forces are unleashed against us here or in any part of the world, we must never hate; we must always love; we must always love.’***

**Now to Northern Uganda, afflicted for 20 years by the notorious Lord’s Resistance Army (LRA) - no Lord of ours - with mass killings, rapings and abduction of at least 25 thousand child soldiers, subjecting them to beatings, hunger and forcing them to fight against the Ugandan Army. HART visited a place at the epicentre of violence and we responded to a desperate plea to provide help for care for orphans.**

**After a couple of years, a Peace Agreement was signed, so the reign of terror abated. I was walking down the main street of the town of Kitgum, near our orphanage, where I was approached by 2 teenagers: Justin and Denis, with splendid Ugandan smiles. We talked about everything under the sun. As we arrived to the place where I was staying, I asked if they had had no problems with the LRA. Their faces changed; they described how they had been abducted, together with their best friend. They had been force marched to an Army Training Camp; they were beaten, kept hungry and had to use live ammunition firing on other children as target practice. Their best friend escaped and was recaptured; he was staked out on the ground and they had to kill him. Then Justin broke down in tears. He described how, after he escaped, the LRA killed his father, so he feels guilty for death of his Dad.**

**I went to find my colleague David, who had served as a Chaplain with the Royal Navy/Marines for 20 years. I told him there were 2 young men whom it would be good for him to meet. They had a wonderful time of prayer and healing. As Justin and Denis left, looking so happy, they offered to write their testimonies. We welcomed the offer enthusiastically. When we returned from the orphanage the next day, they were sitting there as smartly dressed as possible. We were going to have supper, so I invited them to join us.**

**They said they had already eaten. I didn’t believe them. I said *‘Come on, guys, I’ve never met a teenager who couldn’t eat 2 suppers’.***

**They wolfed the food – I’m sure they hadn’t eaten. Their testimonies were beautifully written and, as they read them, Justin broke down again reading about the death of his Dad. On the back page, I could see figures and I thought they were going to ask for money. I wouldn’t have minded if they had. They needed money for everything: food, clothes, education. But, when they got to the back page, I couldn’t have been more wrong. Those figures were not a request for money. They said they wanted to give us a gift – and the only gift they had were their favourite verses from the Bible. So these figures - chapters and verses from the Bible - were their gift to us. What a miracle of grace: teenagers who had suffered so much and needed so much, gave us a gift, their favourite verses from the Bible.**

**We asked if they had their own Bibles. They didn’t, so we gave then ours. They were so excited. It was like giving them a Christmas stocking. They eagerly leafed through the pages to find their favourite verses: their gifts for us**

**Finally, to Syria: my first visit was in 2016 when ISIS and other Jihadists were still fighting in much of the country, including Aleppo. We visited Western Aleppo while Eastern Aleppo was still held by Jihadists. An Armenian pastor organised our programme, beginning with an inclusive outdoor banquet with Imams, Mullahs, Yazidis, and the different Christian traditions. This was sacrificial as there was a severe shortage of food in Western Aleppo. Bombs were falling constantly. We were only 350 metres from the Jihadist frontline, but a quintet played beautiful music while the bombs fell – that’s the spirit of Armenia!**

**The next morning, we attended a service in one of the Armenian Churches. It was also inclusive, with Imams and Mullahs sitting in the front pews. The children’s choir kept singing beautifully while the bombs were falling.**

**After the service, a Chaldean Catholic priest came to us and reminded us of the story of so-called Doubting Thomas, who wasn’t present when Our Lord appeared to the other disciples and he said he wouldn’t believe unless Christ appeared to him and he could put his hands into our Lord’s wounded hands and side – and Jesus invited him to do so and then required him to believe, go and tell.**

**The priest said to us:**

***‘Thank you for coming. Like St. Thomas the Apostle who asked to put his hand into Christ’s wounded hands and wounded side, you came to put your hands into the wounds of our suffering. Now you have seen our pain, you can believe, go and tell our story.’***

**What a privilege to be alongside the courageous and compassionate church. We can never feel the anguish they endure but we can ‘put our hands into the wounds of their suffering – and believe, go and tell’.**

**So, thank you very, very much for privilege of sharing some of the miracles of grace we encounter when we are with our brothers and sisters in the courageous and compassionate church on those frontlines of faith and freedom.**