

Leprosy Sunday 2020 Sermon on Luke 10:25-37

Hello! My name is Chris Stratta and I am your Regional Manager for The Leprosy Mission. I thoroughly enjoyed visiting Chandler's Ford URC last September to speak at the Harvest Supper. I'm so pleased to be able to join the four churches virtually for today's Leprosy Sunday service, to give an update on the amazing difference you are making to people affected by leprosy.

Hymn: R&S 38: Thou whose almighty word (vv1-3)

Prayers of adoration and confession

God of light arising from darkness,
God of health and healing,
God of truth and love,
we praise you.

You made us so we are incomplete without each other.

We praise you for the gift of our neighbours,
especially those whose lives, though different from our own,
show us your reality through their loving service to others.

Yet, gracious and loving God,
as we come to you in prayer,
as we lay our hearts before you,
we admit to you our own shortsightedness.

You already know

how we think more about ourselves than our neighbour next door,
let alone our neighbours who live around the world.

We get so caught up in the needs in our own lives
we forget to think about, much less pray for
people we've never met.***

Assurance of pardon

Listen: here is good news. Christ Jesus came into the world
to forgive us in our failure, to accept us as we are,
to set us free from evil's power and make us what we were meant to be.

Through him God says to each of us:

You are accepted. You are forgiven. I will set you free.

And we respond: through Jesus Christ our Lord:

Amen. Thanks be to God.

The Lord's Prayer

OUR FATHER WHO ART IN HEAVEN,

HALLOWED BE THY NAME,

THY KINGDOM COME, THY WILL BE DONE ON EARTH,

AS IT IS IN HEAVEN.

GIVE US THIS DAY OUR DAILY BREAD,

AND FORGIVE US OUR TRESPASSES,

**AS WE FORGIVE THOSE WHO TRESPASS AGAINST US,
AND LEAD US NOT INTO TEMPTATION,
BUT DELIVER US FROM EVIL.
FOR THINE IS THE KINGDOM, THE POWER AND THE GLORY,
FOR EVER AND EVER. AMEN.**

Hebrew Bible Reading: Leviticus 19:1-18

Gospel Reading: Luke 10:25-37

Here is today's sermon:

In this iconic scene from a film released in 2011, it's 1942 and Steve Rodgers has enlisted in the U.S. Army. He's recruited among other soldiers as a potential candidate for a 'super-soldier' experiment. The leader of the experiment thinks that Steve has the qualities needed, but he's the skinniest and the weakest of the soldiers, so Colonel Chester Phillips doubts his suitability. Phillips decides to give the recruits a test of character in an astonishing way. He throws a grenade into the group of recruits as they are doing exercises, shouting 'Grenade!' All of the recruits jump away onto the floor. All, that is, except for one. Steve Rodgers jumps onto the grenade, covers it, shouts 'Get back!' then throws the grenade. There's no explosion. It was a dummy grenade, but Steve and the recruits didn't know that. Looking confused, Steve says "Is this a test?" It is, and he has passed it. With an extraordinary act of self-sacrifice, Steve Rodgers has demonstrated that he is the right man for the experiment, the man who will become Captain America. He has the character to be a hero.

I wonder who you think of when you hear the word 'hero'? We might think of a fictional superhero, someone like Captain America. Perhaps you're thinking of a real life hero instead, someone like Rosa Parks. Her decision on 1st December 1955 to refuse to give up her seat to a white man on a bus meant that she became a symbol of hope in the battle to resist racial segregation. But for Rosa, that sacrifice meant arrest, the loss of her job and receiving death threats for many years. I believe that heroes have one thing in common: the willingness to make sacrifices for the good of others. People affected by leprosy need heroes. They often live in extremely poor conditions facing a bleak future. Leprosy causes nerve damage to people's hands leaving them numb and vulnerable to wounds, which if untreated can become infected, leading to permanent disabilities or the need for amputation. People affected by leprosy often live in fear because of the stigma that causes their friends, families and neighbours to reject them. They can feel like 'the least' because of this rejection. Tragically, lack of psychosocial support for those with leprosy can lead to high levels of mental illness and suicide. In Myanmar, specialist medical care is extremely limited, so many people affected by leprosy don't have access to the support that they need. People affected by leprosy need heroes like the Leprosy Mission's medical team at Mawlamyine Christian Leprosy Hospital.

The hospital staff are living sacrificially, having followed God's call. One of these heroes is Dr Roma, a knowledgeable, humble and down-to-earth lady. When she was working in Ethiopia, she realised that God had made her a doctor because He wanted to use her to glorify His name. But when she got back to Myanmar in 2003, she felt that God wasn't using her. She felt God prompting her to move to Mawlamyine Hospital, but she didn't want to go. When she prayed, she told God "I'm not going there" but when she said "Amen" she felt uneasy, so she prayed again and again felt God prompting her to go. This time, she accepted the position at Mawlamyine.

Following God's call means becoming like Jesus for people affected by leprosy. This is Dr Saw, an incredible doctor and a man inspired by Jesus Christ. Dr Saw explains that because in Jesus, God came to live as a person among us, he believes he must look beyond his pride to intentionally be beside his leprosy patients. This means not only that he laughs and cries with them, but that he uses the same toilets, eats the same food and sleeps in the wards with them. He wants to know what it's like to be a patient in order to provide the best care that he can to people who he says are like him: sinners yet made in the image of God. Dr Saw is not alone in being inspired by Jesus Christ to create an oasis of love and acceptance for the 3,000 leprosy patients that come to Mawlamyine Hospital each year. The whole medical team go above and beyond, from diagnosing leprosy and giving the cure, to providing surgery, physiotherapy and counselling. They work long hours, giving their lives sacrificially to be Christ to those who feel like 'the least', who otherwise would have little or no support. They are heroes.

These hospital heroes cannot exist without your help and prayers. You are making it possible for people affected by leprosy to have someone to go, a place where experts will treat and care for them. Knowledge and expertise about leprosy could die out with the more senior doctors and nurses. Dr Roma is seventy years old and she says, "for the days remaining, I'll live my life for Him". This is wonderful but she will need to retire at some point. Your support today will provide a salary, train new medics and keep our hospitals the havens of love and critical care they've become to so many. This simply wouldn't happen without you taking action.

One passage from the Bible which I find challenging when I think of taking action for those in desperate need is in the parable of the Good Samaritan in Luke 10. In the parable, a lawyer seeks to test Jesus by asking him 'Who is my neighbour?' (10:29). Rather than answering directly, Jesus tells him a parable. A traveller is on his way from Jericho to Jerusalem along a road that was notoriously dangerous, full of sudden turnings so thieves could hide easily. The man is not only robbed but also stripped, beaten and left half dead (10:30). Three men encounter the traveller but notice that there are only two responses. Two men do nothing to help the man (10:31-32) but one takes action. We're going to look at this with three headings: passing by, taking action, doing likewise.

Firstly, passing by. That's what the priest does; why does he do nothing to help? He might have simply been afraid that the robbers were still nearby. But as a priest, he would've been on his way to the temple in Jerusalem to lead worship. If he suspected the traveller was dead, to touch him would've made the priest unclean for seven days, so he would lose his turn at the temple. The Old Testament Law says, "a priest must not make himself ceremonially unclean for any of his people who die except for a close relative" (Leviticus 21:1-2). But the Law also says, "love your neighbour as yourself" (Leviticus 19:18), one of the two greatest commandments. By doing nothing to help the traveller, the priest showed that his desire to lead worship in the temple was more important than the man's need. He wasn't willing to become unclean, to lay down his pride. His own status came first. The Levite's response is the same. Levites weren't priests but they assisted the priests, so he is another 'religious' person who puts his own pride first and passes on the other side. Secondly, taking action. At this point, Jesus' listeners were probably expecting the parable to finish with an anti-clerical twist, with the hero of the story being an ordinary, 'lay' Jewish person who shows up the 'religious' ones! But there is a bigger twist. The last person who Jesus' listeners would have expected to help is the one who takes action: the Samaritan. The person who should be the traveller's enemy alone "took pity" (10:33) on him. The only other time Luke uses this word is to describe the love of Jesus himself when the widow carries out her dead son to Jesus (7:13). In Greek, the word for 'pity' is the same as the word for 'intestines', so the Samaritan has such a deep love for this half-dead man, it's as if it reaches his intestines, the depths of his being. It's gut-wrenching! That intense love causes him to act. The Samaritan puts the man on his donkey, which would only have had room for one man meaning the Samaritan would've needed to walk the rest of the way to Jerusalem. He pays the innkeeper two Denarii, which may well have been enough for two months of board! Not only that, he offered to repay the innkeeper for whatever more needed to be spent on the traveller's recovery. These are big sacrifices for a friend, let alone for an enemy! There is no doubt who the neighbour is in the parable. The priest and the Levite must have felt pity for the half-dead traveller, but they did nothing. The man who took action in compassion is the true neighbour.

In 1945, towards the end of the World War II, Japanese Corporal Hideichi Kaiho and his fellow pilots were in a dogfight with American B-29s over Tokyo. The Japanese downed a B-29 and forced the crew to bail, one of which was navigator Raymond Halloran. As Halloran was parachuting at 3,500 feet he was spotted by Kaiho and two other Japanese planes. He knew that the Japanese did not take prisoners, so he decided he may as well wave at the three planes! Remarkably, two of the planes flew away while Kaiho's plane flew around Halloran to protect him. Halloran survived the war and over 50 years later, he met Kaiho in person, the man who had saved his life. Kaiho later explained that his commander had encouraged him to follow the true Bushido, the way of the warrior, which had become corrupted by the

Japanese military. The true way of the warrior meant showing mercy to your enemy.

The Good Samaritan provides us with a beautiful picture of showing mercy to an enemy and that is what Jesus himself did for us. We needed him to take action on our behalf. Corporal Kaiho's act of mercy did not involve giving up his own life. But Jesus made the ultimate sacrifice, willingly laying down his life while we were enemies of God to make us God's friends. The wounds of our sin were deep, but at the cross he healed them through his own wounds. We owed a debt much more than two Denarii because we have not loved God with our whole heart or loved our neighbour as ourselves. But Jesus paid our debts once for all when he died in our place, so that we can spend eternal life with Him.

Thirdly, doing likewise. The challenge that Jesus gave to the lawyer and gives to us is "go and do likewise" (10:37). The lawyer had been asking the wrong question: not 'Who is my neighbour?' but rather 'How can I be a neighbour to others?' Friends, it is not enough for us to feel sorry for those who are poor and in need. Jesus teaches us that our help must be practical. Any person of any nation or religion who is in need is our neighbour. Our help must be as active and as wide as the love of God. When we take action for those who feel like 'the least' of this world, we do it for Jesus.

You are making it possible for lives to be transformed at Mawlamyine Hospital, for people like Phyo. Phyo was diagnosed with leprosy at the age of 19 and he ran away when he was first diagnosed because he was so afraid. He spent years in and out of hospital, but 5 years ago when he was 26, he met a young woman, Mahwe, who was visiting the hospital with her grandmother and asked Phyo for help using her phone. They fell in love, got married and had a son called Chit Yin. Chit's name plays on the way that Phyo and Mahwe met it means "if I call you, only reply to me if you love me". Sadly, Mahwe's family have rejected the family because of Phyo's leprosy and disabilities. He has a severe ulcer on his left foot, so he has plaster around his leg and foot to relieve the pressure. He could only have got this help from Mawlamyine Hospital. He says that without it, "he would have died". His life could have panned out very differently for the worse and Phyo is very aware of that. We're going to watch a film now in which he tells his story. The film can be accessed here:

<https://www.leprosymission.org.uk/get-involved/world-leprosy-sunday-2020/>

I hope that gave you a sense of the amazing difference you are making to people like Phyo. Perhaps you are reading this thinking that you would like to do something to help, so here are some ideas:

- Please join me in praying for people affected by leprosy. Wellesley Bailey described TLM as 'born and cradled in prayer'. It is an amazing privilege to pray to a God who cares for us and longs to answer our prayers.
- £24 finds and cures one person with leprosy. Please give what you can to transform lives and to enable the work at MLCH to continue. You can give by

phone on 01733 370505 or by post by writing to The Leprosy Mission, Goldhay Way, Orton Goldhay, Peterborough, PE2 5GZ.

- Lastly, perhaps due to lockdown you haven't been able to go out once a month for coffee and a cake. If you were to donate £6 per month to The Leprosy Mission, you would cure 3 people of leprosy in a year. That would be wonderful, so please consider what you can do.

Thank you so much for your wonderful support.

I would love to hear from you! Please do call me on 01733 516092 or email me on ChrisS@TLMEW.org.uk to have a chat or to ask me questions about leprosy and the people we serve.

Prayers of thanksgiving and concern in this service were focussed on the Leprosy Mission and praying for the people about whom we have heard.

Hymn R&S 274: God is love (vv1, 3, 4)

Thanks to Chris and to everybody connected with the Leprosy Mission who contributed to our service. Thanks to Paul and Mandy who brought our readings today and to David Herring of Wheatley URC who recorded the accompaniments to our hymns.

Blessing

May the peace of God that transcends all understanding guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.

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