

The Leprosy Mission Talk, May, 2024

Hello everyone, in case some of you this morning don't know me, I'm Joan and I come from Dunwich. Contrary to popular belief, there is still some of medieval Dunwich left that hasn't been eroded away, especially me! God willing. We also still have part of the old city walls, the old ruined Greyfriars Monastery, and of **course**, the Leper Chapel Ruins in our churchyard. It is because of our responsibility for the Leper Chapel, that we as a parish have chosen to support TLM as our primary overseas mission to support.

Contrary to popular belief, leprosy still affects hundreds of thousands of people around the world, and often the most poor, resulting in social exclusion, inability to work and further poverty. There is still a huge stigma surrounding the disease, and the myth still exists that it can be passed on by touch, making many into outcasts of their own communities. It is even cited as cause for divorce. We now know that yes, it is infectious but not contagious.

We know from both the Old and the New Testament that God makes a point of defending the rights of the poor and marginalised, and that all people are made in the image of God, which is why it is so important for us to value each individual, and in particular "The Unseen". This is the theme for this year's project for World **Leprosy Day**, which nowadays seems to run from January through to May and beyond...

To start at the beginning, (see the sheet on HISTORY. (Wellesley Bailey) and TODAY...

In the 1950s a cure for Leprosy was developed, a drug called Dapsone, and after a month, the disease any further development is stopped - the sufferer is cured. Any disability can then be prevented and treated further. However, in the following decade, the leprosy bacteria developed immunity to Dapsone, and so it was developed into Multi-Drug-Therapy, (MDT), sponsored by WHO.

Leprosy if not stopped, affects the nervous system, leaving ??- healing, feet and limbs with loss of feeling, and the numbness means it is too easy to tread on sharp stones and cut feet, or scald hands with a hot kettle without realising it. Even the ability to blink, means that dust can cause infection and develops into blindness.

TLM has a threefold policy now - healing; education and restoring; and empowering.

Healing with the MDT, teaching Leprosy awareness projects, and encouraging the set up of self support in small village communities, where sufferers look after one another, bathing anaesthetised feet and hands to keep them supple, and and empowering them, even proving a means of support such as in the home shopping catalogue, a gift of a goat or donkey, a sewing machine, and training to use them providing a means of support, and primary education for the children who have been rejected, and taunted by their peer group.

I will now give you a couple of stories of two young girls – "The Unseen", that God helped through the efforts of TLM.

Last Sept. issue of the "New Day" magazine gives the story of Rani, a 10 year old, from Sri Lanka, whose father deserted the family, when Mum developed leprosy, and then when Rani later developed discoloured patches on her face, and when her friends at school discovered she was being treated for Leprosy, called her names, taunting her relentlessly until she refused to go to school any more. Her grandfather had recently died suddenly, leaving her Mum struggling to build up the family pottery business. However after a Leprosy awareness project, the children and teachers in school have learned they don't need to be scared of the disease and that it is easily cured, she has once more been accepted by her classmates, with friends to sit next to and play with, happy to go to school, and says she wants to be a doctor when she grows up.

In the January edition of "New Day" magazine, is the story of Rajisha, a pretty 18year old from Bihar, N. India. She developed strange marks on her face and her fingers started to stiffen and claw inwards,

with a bad open sore that wouldn't heal. Fortunately her mother took her to a visiting doctor in her village who told her she had Leprosy. She was frightened and depressed. She was taking the tablets then, but sadly, the medicine came too late to prevent nerve damage, and her fingers curled so much that she couldn't feed herself. Then came a glimmer of hope when the same visiting doctor came back to the village and told her about Muzarffapur Hospital, although 100 km away, it was known for exemplary care, available free of charge. Her parents couldn't take her, as her mother was too poorly to travel, and father couldn't afford time off work, so her journey was frightening, not knowing what was going to happen. When she finally arrived, exhausted, she had to queue for hours outside the crumbling Outpatients Dept. Last year TLM had a project to raise money for a rebuild of the Outpatients Dept. at Muzaffarpur Hospital, since they can have up to 600 people a day waiting outside in the stifling heat or monsoon rains, with very little shelter. Happily, Rajisha was eventually able to see the doctor, hours later, who was kind and tended to her severe medical needs. She was admitted and a week later, well enough to have surgery on her right hand to straighten her fingers. In time she will need to have the procedure on her left hand as well. After her reconstructive surgery and on a ward with girls of a similar age, they helped each other get through the hard days and homesickness but at 18 she should have been taking her final exams, but feels as though the future holds the possibility of returning to a 'normal life', and a second chance to achieve better things in the future, saying she wants to be a nurse, as she wants to serve as she was served when she was so sad.

May God grant her a safe and happy life, and give to those in trouble or pain comfort, and the knowledge that he cares. May God give patience and skill to those who serve, especially in the poorest parts of countries of the world where Leprosy is diagnosed every 2 minutes, and bring healing, awareness, restoration of hope, and empowering them to live fruitful and happy lives, with dignity and excellence.

Joan Godfrey.