

The Leprosy Mission

1 Kings 19

Revelation 3: v14-22

Thank you so much for this opportunity to join in your service and talk about the work of the Leprosy Mission. With COVID-19 we have become all too familiar with the impact a disease can have on our personal freedoms and community life. We've all come to appreciate the dedication of our NHS and care home workers and the many others who provide essential services – our postman has been really helpful and cheerful! "Shielding", "Lockdown" and "Social Distancing" are all new terms now in daily use and understood. When will we return to normal? Who knows, but it is good to hear that there are people with the necessary skills working to develop tests, to identify and assess potential treatments and to test a possible vaccine.

I wonder if you have thought about examples of social distancing in the Bible? Have you noticed that these are often times when people met with God? It happened with Moses and the burning bush. It happened after the sacrifices on Mount Carmel when Elijah took refuge in the desert. It happened with Jesus in the wilderness. For me, the very special image is from Revelation chapter 3 and verse 20, where it is Jesus himself who "stands at the door and knocks ... and will come in". Praise God for crossing so many barriers, and in his great love sending his only Son, our Saviour, into this world. May we all know his presence in our lives, especially so when many people feel so isolated. We have a loving God who guides and protects us, whatever the circumstances.

Of all diseases, leprosy is most renowned as the focus for stigma and social distancing. Reaching out to people affected by leprosy is at the heart of the work of the Leprosy Mission, now approaching its 150th anniversary. Yet today many people think that leprosy no longer exists. So today, why are there still people affected with leprosy? Is there really a need for the Leprosy Mission?

There are three reasons why the need is still there. First, the mycobacteria causing leprosy is found in warm tropical countries, but it affects only those who are most vulnerable, those with the poorest diets and standard of living and as a result the weakest immune systems. Second - and understandably - in the same countries the limited resources available for health services have been focussed on eliminating killer diseases like polio, malaria, measles and TB. Leprosy hardly gets a look in. Third, in leprosy it takes many months or even years from the time of infection until the earliest signs of disease appear, so that makes it impossible to trace contacts and the source of infection.

The situation is that people are still being infected by leprosy and need to be made aware of their disease and the need to be diagnosed and treated. A minority of people may experience one or other of the complications that may arise and require hospital treatment. Where there are lengthy delays in diagnosis the treatment will still be effective but the damage to nerves may have become irreversible, so people have to live with permanent loss of sensation and muscle weakness. This may mean because of injuries they are unable to carry out their work. If they develop foot ulcers, then they may require bed rest and hospital treatment and are therefore unable to support their families. In some places reconstructive surgery is available which can restore some movement. Where amputations are unavoidable then artificial limbs are provided. Training programmes may be provided promoting alternative and safer forms of work that provide an alternative source of income without the fear of injury. There are also programmes of Community-based rehabilitation where small groups learn to work together, become self-reliant, something that can open the way back into normal relations with the local community.

Every year more than 100,000 people worldwide are diagnosed with leprosy, the largest patient groups coming from India, Nepal, Bangladesh and Brazil. So yes, even after almost 150 years, there is still plenty of work for the Leprosy Mission!

The most recent country featured by Leprosy Mission is its work in Myanmar (formerly

Burma). There is just the one hospital in the country dedicated to services to people affected by leprosy. The work is funded entirely by donations from supporters around the world. The film coming up focusses on how the work benefits the lives of individual affected by leprosy.

Film: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=U5nuxYQKoMk>

I hope you enjoyed seeing the film and have a clearer idea of the dedicated work of the Leprosy Mission is changing peoples' lives.

If you can support the work financially then of course that is most welcome. The thing that everyone can do is to pray, so do please pray regularly for the work of the Mission and all its staff, especially now as some of the hospitals have been placed on standby to accept COVID patients.

Leaflets describing the work and a Prayer Diary are available from the Leprosy Mission England and Wales via their web site. Once normal church services resume a supply can be made available for your church.

Thank you again for your welcome. The Lord bless and keep you all. For our closing prayer we draw on Hebrews 13 and verse 20:

May the God of peace, who through the blood of the eternal covenant brought back from the dead our Lord Jesus, that great shepherd of the sheep, equip us all with everything good to do his will, and may he work in us what is pleasing to him through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory for ever and ever. Amen.

Peter Nicholls – The Leprosy Mission