

## Sermon Notes

### Leprosy Sunday 2024

#### Old Testament reading (Key reading): Psalm 121 (NIV)

1 I lift up my eyes to the mountains—

where does my help come from?

2 My help comes from the Lord,

the Maker of heaven and earth.

3 He will not let your foot slip—

he who watches over you will not slumber;

4 indeed, he who watches over Israel

will neither slumber nor sleep.

5 The Lord watches over you—

the Lord is your shade at your right hand;

6 the sun will not harm you by day,

nor the moon by night.

7 The Lord will keep you from all harm—

he will watch over your life;

8 the Lord will watch over your coming and going

both now and forevermore.

#### New Testament reading: Hebrew 12: 1-2 (NIV)

1 Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles. And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, 2 fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith. For the joy set before him he endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.

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#### SLIDE 1

I wonder are any of you keen hikers or walkers here today? For those who pursue this as a very serious hobby or even career, pursuing the greatest height of all, Mount Everest, is a dream only few will achieve. At one point this was an unachievable mission, where many tried and failed. That was until Edmund Hillary made the impossible, possible in 1953 with the help of Tenzing Norgay. Suddenly from that day on, scaling the dizzying heights of Everest became a challenge that could be conquered. The impossible became possible.

Can anyone take a guess at the height of Mount Everest?... just over 8,800m high! Slieve Donard seems like a gentle walk in the park in comparison at only 850m tall. To put that to scale that is just over 5,866 Volkswagen Golfs, and would anyone like to take a guess at how many digestive biscuits that is?... only approximately 125,714. Maybe the reward of that many chocolate biscuits could spur me on to climb that high.

Every new achievement or a path never ventured, is always faced with disbelief and doubt in it's early stages.

Tucked away in the rugged terrain of the Himalayas, in the shadow of Mount Everest, high up on a hill is a hospital named Anandaban and it is working towards a mountainous achievement, one that many think is unreachable. But with your help we can reach Greater Heights. We can see an end to leprosy!

Now I know there are many probably thinking 'leprosy? Surely that is no longer a problem'. We read about leprosy in our Bibles, and we can easily dismiss it as a thing of the past. However, this is simply not the case. Leprosy is still extremely prevalent to this day. It is still destroying the lives of men, women and children and preventing them reaching the heights they dream of achieving.

#### SLIDE 2

Shockingly there are nearly a quarter of a million newly diagnosed cases of leprosy every single year, with 10% of those cases found in children.

#### SLIDE 3

That means every two minutes someone in our world hears the words 'you have leprosy'. Those may be three short words but with them carries fear, stigma and shame.

#### SLIDE 4

Leprosy is often a disease linked to poverty, effecting the poorest of the poor in our world. It thrives in areas where poor nutrition, overcrowding, shared wash facilities and low standards of living naturally lower people's immune systems.

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#### SLIDE 5

Leprosy works slowly, almost undetectable at the very start. Early symptoms start with light numb patches on the skin. It progresses by shortening tendons leaving clawed like hands and drop foot. It then destroys nerve endings in the hands, feet and face leaving those affected with no ability to feel pain anymore. The very feeling that protects us by alerting us to danger. If left untreated wounds and cuts progress to ulcers and infection and finally to permanent, irreversible and unnecessary disability. This should not be the case with a curable disease. Yet it is the case for so many, disability robbing them of their independence and freedom further adding to their feelings of hopelessness and isolation.

And just when you think that leprosy can't take anymore from an individual, it causes more hurt and pain through stigma and discrimination. Imagine spending every day of your life as an outcast, an outsider and observing the world from the fringes. Those affected by leprosy are often pushed out of their communities and abandoned by their family. There are laws which prevent them from having certain jobs, marrying certain people or even their right to health care. It sounds unbearable, doesn't it? It sounds lonely, isolating and entrenches a deep feeling of shame and unworthiness of love. Imagine experiencing all of this simply because you have a curable disease. Suddenly we can start to see that leprosy is so much more than a disease. It is an injustice that must be stopped.

This is exactly what Anandaban and other hospitals and projects like it is trying to achieve. But they desperately need your help. Anandaban, situated in the heights of the mountains is a beacon of hope and light. Many look up to it knowing they will find refuge and care.

#### SLIDE 6

Kashi is one person who has most definitely felt the warmth and love of Anandaban. In fact, Anandaban is his home. Leprosy tried to stifle his life and potential. From a very young age he experienced the cruelty and suffering of the stigma that leprosy brings. Even though he was only a child he was forced to live in a cattle shelter, because those in his village were so afraid of his leprosy. He wasn't allowed to go to school, he wasn't allowed to be a child and play with others. He spent years alone, abandoned and neglected before he was finally able to go to hospital for treatment.

#### SLIDE 7

When Kashi arrived at Anandaban, he was immediately greeted with warmth and kindness. In no time it felt like home. It was because of the love and care of those at Anandaban that he knew leprosy would not rob anything more from him. He set his sights on Greater Heights. Kashi decided to stay at Anandaban and train to become a nurse, to show the same love and compassion to others that he was shown. Thirty years on he is 'uncle Kashi' on the wards. He is an expert bandager, and his cheery smile means people cannot help but talk to him and share their burdens. But let's hear more about Kashi from the man himself!

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Video – **SLIDE 8**

#### **SLIDE 9**

Because of your love, Kashi overcame the mountains in his way, but not only that, he is now helping others reach greater heights. People like Shakti.

Shakti thought her life and future would be over. Leprosy, not only made her an outsider within her community, but it even took her leg. Shakti's ulcers just would not heal, meaning infection took hold and her leg needed to be amputated. At the age of 16, instead of being at school preparing for her exams, she was at Anandaban. Suddenly her dreams of attending university seemed unachievable; something that could have been. If only Shakti's leprosy was spotted early, then this would not be the case. It's an injustice and it's simply not fair that the dreams of child should be extinguished before they've even had a chance to catch light.

#### **SLIDE 10**

Even though we feel the injustice and outrage of this preventable disability, we are thankful that Shakti's story doesn't end there. Because of you and the staff at Anandaban Shakti has a passion and drive to reach Greater Heights. With her new prosthetic Shakti has the ability and independence to pursue her dreams. With a new confidence and aspiration university doesn't seem out of reach.

#### **SLIDE 11**

Now at the age of 19 Shakti only has one more year left of studying and exams to become an accountant. Her determination and drive are so evident. She has set her sights on getting a good job in a bank; she wants to help support and care for her parents. Even though Shakti is still facing hurdles and obstacles with stigma at college, we know this will not stop her. Leprosy had already taken her dream of being a doctor away, due to her disability. There is no way it will take another.

You are helping those affected reach Greater Heights, to achieve their dreams and conquer the mountains that stand in their way. You are helping support hospitals like Anandaban to be a beacon of hope and endless possibilities.

But as people look to Anandaban, it is our hope and prayer that they see much more than a building.

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#### SLIDE 12

Psalm 121 “I lift up my eyes to the mountains – where does my help come from? My help comes from the Lord, the Maker of heaven and earth”. God is at the centre of all that we do. It is our prayer, that through the actions of our staff, from the prayer meetings in our hospitals and your prayers, that those affected would see Jesus. That they see the hope that He has to offer.

This Psalm is a part of the group named ‘songs of assent’ and this one in particular is a psalm given to travellers on a journey. It is to reassure and give confidence that God is with us on our journey; he is our watcher, our keeper our preserver.

#### SLIDE 13

In Hebrew that is the same word ‘Shamar’ used six times. The Lord is our keeper and protects us through all stages, possibilities and circumstances, now and forever more. When we sleep God is there, when we encounter challenges, God is there! That is the key promise of this Psalm. God was with individuals like Kashi and Shakti through their journey to recovery and healing. He was their watcher and keeper, and they felt His love through the care and compassion of the staff at Anandaban. The same God that journeys with the individual, is the God over the heavens and earth. He is over the big issues in our world and is over the journey still to come.

The Leprosy Mission has a mountainous task before us. One that that at many times could feel like an uphill battle. Some would say that it is impossible. The Leprosy Mission wants to see zero leprosy transmission by 2035. Isn’t it amazing to think that a world without leprosy could be on the horizon. So how do we plan to make that possible. Well we have staff like Kashi and doctors who are out searching to diagnose new cases and curing people of leprosy, stopping it in it’s tracks. We have teams who contact trace to slow the spread. Covid has brought understanding to how things like that work. It will be through scientific breakthroughs. Anandaban are leading the way in new ulcer care treatments, and others are working on smart phone imaging diagnosis and even a potential vaccine. A vaccine is a realistic possibility for the years ahead and will be a complete game changer.

But just like Edmund Hillary, his achievement would not have been possible without his guide Tenzing, similarly this goal or mission cannot be achieved without the kindness and care of people like you. God is our guide, our ‘Shamar’, and you are our valued companions on this journey to end leprosy. Achieving this mission would not be possible without your support, prayer and contributions which take many different forms.

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#### SLIDE 14

You can help care for the immediate needs of those affected by leprosy, but your love can help end leprosy once and for all! This year, The Leprosy Mission marks its 150 year anniversary, and as we look back we are thankful for everyone who has faithfully helped in this journey thus far. People supporting through prayer, volunteering and giving have brought about achievement like, MDT the cure to leprosy, reconstructive hand surgery which has returned independence to 1000s of people over the years. But at this key time, we can't only look back. We must look forward at what is to come and what still needs to be conquered. What seemingly impossible thing needs to be made possible next?

So, I am asking you today, what will you do to help those affected reach greater heights. And what will you do to play your part in reaching the greatest height of all; ending leprosy.

Will it be through prayer. "My help comes from the Lord, the Maker of heaven and earth". We know it will only be through prayer and faith that this mission will be fulfilled. Pray the Lord would be our 'Shamar', our watcher and keeper over this journey to end leprosy.

#### SLIDE 15

Will it be through a gift. Did you know that something as little as £24 can find and cure someone from their leprosy, just like Shakti. That in itself is life changing. You could help train nurses, ensuring more people like Kashi are there to care for and support leprosy patients. Maybe your church could even help fund a researcher's salary to help bring scientific breakthroughs to end leprosy once and for all.

#### SLIDE 16

I would love for you to consider coming on this journey with us as a regular giver. Something as little as £10 a month could find and cure 5 people with leprosy over the course of the year, just like Shakti. We often wouldn't think twice on spending that getting our lunch out with friends, yet for the same cost you could help stop leprosy in its tracks and transform someone's life.

#### SLIDE 17

So, as we recognise and give thanks for those who have faithfully served to get us to where we stand today, let us run the race set before us with perseverance, to serve, to minister to those in need, and let us do it with our eyes fixed on Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith as we read in Hebrews 12. It is his example we follow, because we know that Jesus cured leprosy in his lifetime, so we are called to end it in ours. Let's be the hands and feet of Jesus today and with his spirit working and moving within us we will reach greater heights.