

Father Damien, the Friend of Lepers

Joseph Damien was born in 1840 in the village of Tremeloo in Flanders, Belgium. He was the son of a Belgian peasant, and as a boy, often helped his father with the work on the farm. Because of this he grew into a strong lad, and being very handy with tools, was able to do all kinds of useful jobs.

.Joseph and his brother were brought up to understand the Christian message, and it was Joseph's brother, Pamphile who wanted to be a missionary to the Sandwich Islands.

However, Pamphile became seriously ill, and realized that he might never go to the Sandwich Islands and share the gospel with the people there.

"Would it make you happy if I took your place as a missionary?" asked Joseph one day. Pamphile's eyes lighted up for a moment and he squeezed his brother's hand, smiling.

Joseph wrote to the church for permission to be his brother's replacement on the mission. When permission was granted Joseph was very excited.

In 1863, Joseph Damien started out by sailing-ship for the South Seas. He was full of enthusiasm as he began his ministry on one of the Sandwich Islands. He worked there teaching and preaching for ten years, During this time, the disease of leprosy was detected among an increasing number of the local people. Because leprosy is contagious the authorities became increasingly alarmed for the disease was spreading at a great rate. The government decided to isolate all lepers on a separate island to prevent any further spread of the disease in the community. The island of Molokai was set aside for lepers and anyone banished to the island knew they had little or no hope of ever returning to their home and families.

Father Damien's kind heart was deeply touched by the sad plight of these poor people and he approached the Bishop of the church in the islands for permission to go to Molokai and minister to the neglected lepers. The Bishop agreed to his request and he made his way to the isolation from which he would never return.

On arrival at Molokai he was appalled at the conditions in which the poor people had been left to exist. They lived in makeshift houses, often with poor roofing that let the frequent rains in, creating mud puddles on the earth floor. They had no regular food supply and insufficient water for their daily needs. Some of the more fortunate had relatives who brought them food or clothing occasionally, but they would not venture on to the island and any such goods would be left on the beach without contacting the ones for whom it was intended.

As soon as he arrived, Father Damien set to work to supply the settlement with an adequate water supply. He asked the government for materials and, with the help of the strongest lepers, he built a reservoir in the hills and laid water pipes to the villages near the coast. His next task was to build better housing for the people. In ten years Father Damien had seen to the building of six hundred houses. There was the need for a hospital where the more advanced cases of leprosy could be treated medically. He nursed them, dressed their wounds, comforted them when they were dying and dug their graves when they were to be buried. As time passed, people in Europe heard of his unselfish work and sent out money and goods to help in the work.

One day as he worked in the hospital, he accidentally spilt some boiling water on his foot. "That's strange," he thought. "I can't feel anything. I should be feeling the burning."

Leprosy affects the nerves of the body and causes lack of feeling on the affected parts. The fingers and toes wear away because, without any feeling, the victim damages them on hard and sharp things. Because there is no warning pain, there is irreparable damage done to their limbs.

Father Damien went to a doctor. "Do I have leprosy, doctor?" he asked. After a thorough examination the doctor looked at him gravely and confirmed his suspicions.

Father Damien said that even if he could be cured by forsaking the island he would not desert the lepers. They were the people to whom God had called him, and there he would remain. He worked on as a leper among the lepers until his death. Father Damien's ministry is remembered around the world. He had lived out the life of Jesus among the outcasts of the islands, showing kindness and love to them, and brought many to know Jesus personally.

God is a Servant – Themes for Christian Studies 7

Activities

1. What work did Joseph Damien do as a child?
2. Where are the Sandwich Islands?
3. Describe Joseph's work there.
4. Why were the people with leprosy sent to the island of Molokai?
5. How did Joseph Damien help the lepers on the island?
6. How did he first realise that he had leprosy?
7. Why do you think he chose to stay on the island, even after he caught the disease?
8. What do you think Jesus means when He asks us all to take up our cross?
(Read Luke 9:23-26)
9. What did Jesus say about serving in John 12:23-26?