

The Faithful Shepherd of Eyam

In the centre of England is the tiny village of Eyam. On the green hillsides surrounding the village, white sheep graze. This is a true story retelling some events which took place during the 17th century, in the time of London's Great Plague.

In the spring, the sheep would be shorn by the shepherds and the farmer's wives spun the wool into yarn. The weavers of the village would weave the yarn into fine woollen cloth which would then be taken to London to be sold to traders from all over Europe.

In the summer of 1665, the terrible disease, the bubonic plague, struck London. The disease was carried by fleas which lived on the back of rats. It caused high fevers and black and pink swellings like huge boils all over the body. Very few people who contracted the disease recovered.

The disease did not spread to any great extent outside London because in those days few people traveled. However, one day the tailor in the village of Eyam started to show all the symptoms of the plague. In a few days he had died. Shortly afterwards his wife and children all became ill and died. Where had this family contracted the disease? They reached the conclusion that it had been introduced into the tailor's household when a package of patterns had been sent to him from London. Evidently the package had been handled by someone who had the disease.

The villagers were terror-stricken and many quickly packed their household goods and fled from Eyam. William Mompesson, a minister of the Church of England, and his helper, William Stanley, gave all their time caring for the sick as one by one, people fell ill with the plague.

Catherine Mompesson, the minister's wife, became fearful. She saw that there was no hope for any of the family to escape the disease, and she begged her husband to leave the village with her and their children. But William would not leave the people he cared for, so Catherine decided to stay with her husband, but they sent the children to stay safely with friends in another village.

After a few months the plague had the village in its grip. It became obvious to William that if any more people left the village, they would be causing the disease to spread to other parts of England. William explained the situation to the village people, who all agreed to stay in Eyam and isolate themselves from the rest of the population. They gave up their work, closed down schools and all trade ceased. The houses became hospitals for the sick.

For four months Eyam was left to itself without once coming into contact with the outside world. Day by day they saw the villagers become ill and die. Catherine

Mompesson was one who died. There were 259 deaths out of the 300 residents. Then, with the advent of colder weather in October 1666, the plague suddenly ceased.

The people of Eyam had given themselves unselfishly in order to save the lives of possibly hundreds of others. William and Catherine Mompesson followed the example of Jesus in giving themselves to help and encourage the village people, instead of running away.

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Activities – The Faithful Shepherd of Eyam

PART A

1. Where did this story take place?
2. What was the main industry in Eyam at the time of the story?
3. How was the bubonic plague carried?
4. What were the symptoms of the disease?
5. How did the bubonic plague spread to Eyam?
6. As the plague grew worse, William advised people to stay in Eyam. Why did he do this?
7. Why would you say that the people of Eyam made a sacrifice?
8. When we think about giving, we usually think about giving money. However it is possible to give in other ways, just as William and Catherine gave of themselves to help others. Make a list of ways in which people can give without using money.

PART B

God is a servant

Jesus served in the greatest way anyone could ever serve. He gave His life as a sacrifice for our sins. God tells us that when we serve by giving, we will receive back more than we have given. (Luke 6:38) This does not mean that we will always be given money or possessions. God can give to us in other ways. Acts 20:35 tells us that we receive more blessing from giving than receiving.

How can I give to others this week?

(Remember that giving does not have to be in terms of possessions or money. It can be time and effort.)