

## **What Do You Have in Your Hand? By Lieutenant-Colonel Jennifer Groves**

Scripture Reading: 1 Kings 17: 1-6

### **Introduction**

We are in an exciting time of the year. Yes, winter is passing by and spring is on the horizon but it's not actually the change of seasons that is creating the excitement for me. What excites me is that we are entering the season of "Partners in Mission" or, as I have come to know it, "Self Denial." It is a time when we think beyond ourselves to those in other countries and contexts who are less fortunate than ourselves, people who we can reach out to in love and give from our resources to make a difference in their lives. The ministry of The Salvation Army now stretches around the world to 128 countries and our giving through the Partners in Mission/Self Denial campaign will enable us to fulfil the overall mission of saving souls, growing saints and serving suffering humanity in the name of Christ.

Why am I so passionate about this campaign? It is because I have not only had the privilege of contributing to it since I was a young child, but I have also been on the receiving end of it in my service in Portugal and Taiwan. The ministry in these two territories was greatly supported by funds from the Partners in Mission/Self Denial campaign. What I love about this campaign is that it enables everyone to work together to make a difference in the lives of others.

Think of the various disasters that have occurred around the world in recent times:

- **Photo of fires in Portugal (Slide 1)**

In July 2017, raging forest fires in central Portugal killed at least 62 people, many of them trapped in their cars as flames swept over a road, in what the Prime Minister called "the biggest tragedy" the country has experienced in years. Portugal declared three days of national mourning for the victims of the blaze, which caused an irreparable loss of human life.

- **Photo of mud slide in Sierra Leone (Slide 2)**

Sierra Leone suffered the worst flooding in over two decades which resulted in a hillside giving way, creating a massive mud slide which trapped residents while they were sleeping. At least 100 houses were hit and thousands of people were affected. Several hundred people died (400 as of August 18, 2017) and thousands were unaccounted for.

- **Photo of terrorist attack in Barcelona (Slide 3)**

A terrorist deliberately drove a vehicle down Las Rambles in Barcelona, one of the busiest tourist spots in the city, hitting as many pedestrians as possible. There were 14 deaths, including a Canadian, and over 100 people were injured.

Although emergency relief funding will be given to Sierra Leone and to other countries, enabling them to respond to their urgent needs, it is self-denial giving that will be used to strengthen the fulfilment of the mission there.

**So what does it mean for us to be intentional in our sacrificial giving and self-denial?**

- **Photo of paddy fields (Slide 4)**

One of the privileges of my appointment at International Headquarters was being able to visit territories within the zone of South Pacific and East Asia and be involved in specific ministry there. In September 2011 it was my privilege to visit Myanmar (former Burma) for a period of 12 days. While visiting the rural villages of Upper Myanmar, I was deeply challenged. Many salvationists live in very poor rural communities and earn just enough each day to feed their families. However, the Home League ladies do not allow this to exclude them from being able to give. At harvest time they work for a day in the rice fields and everything they earn on that day they give joyfully as their contribution to self-denial. This has been a challenge to me when considering my own self-denial giving.

- **Photo of mercy seat (Slide 5)**

**What does scripture say to us about self-denial?**

- **Luke 21: 2-4** Jesus saw the rich putting their gifts into the temple treasury but he also saw the poor widow who put in two small coins. Jesus said the rich gave from their wealth but the widow gave all she had to live on.
- **John 6: 1-15** Jesus and the disciples were with a large crowd and food was needed. The disciples went looking and Andrew found a boy with his small lunch. Jesus took his five small barley loaves and two small fish, blessed it and it was enough to feed 5,000 people with 12 baskets left over.
- **John 12: 1-11** Jesus, visiting Simon, had not been extended the normal courtesy of having his feet washed from his journey. A woman came and poured expensive perfume on Jesus' feet and wiped them with her hair. The disciples saw it as utter waste but Jesus received it as a gift of anointing.

On all three occasions, the gifts given were not leftovers but were in fact sacrificial offerings given without thought of personal cost.

**What if we have nothing to give?**

Let us consider our reading from this morning – 1 Kings 17: 1-16 which mentions the widow of Zarephath. Although this is a story we may not be familiar with, it has great significance when we think about self-denial.

- **Ahab (Slide 6)**

Ahab, king of Israel, did not live according to the way of God:

- he built an idol and served and worshipped Baal
- he did more evil than all the kings who had gone before him
- he considered sin to be trivial
- others sacrificed greatly in order to fulfil his plans but at great personal cost

Ahab's behaviour did more to provoke the anger of God than all the kings of Israel before him (16: 33). Elijah was sent by God with a message for Ahab.

“As the Lord, the God of Israel, lives, whom I serve, there will be neither dew nor rain in the next few years except at my word.” (17: 1)

- **Photo of rice drying (Slide 7)**

He was told that the famine and drought would come, affecting the whole nation, thus harming the innocent and the guilty. The drought came resulting in the famine. God told Elijah to leave and go and hide in the Kareth Ravine where he would drink from the brook and be fed by the ravens. God protected his messenger and provided him with food and water. But eventually the brook dried up and God told him to go at once to Zarephath and stay there because God had commanded a widow to feed him.

### **Widow of Zarephath**

There is significance in this woman being a widow:

- widows were usually the poorest of all citizens
- widows were usually the neediest people in the land
- widows were given little support by the wider community

- **Photo of woman with baby on her back (Slide 8)**

The drought had exhausted her entire food supply and she was out gathering sticks before going home to prepare the last meal for her and her son. She was desperate knowing she had nothing more to give her child after this meal. Imagine how you would feel as a parent in this situation.

She was preparing for her and her son to die and could not see any future hope. Into this desperate situation walks Elijah. He calls to her asking her to provide water for him as the brook is dry. The widow provides water from the little she has - **this was her first act of self-denial.**

Elijah then asked for some bread as well. Notice her response. She is a Sidonian and does not follow the God of Israel yet she replies giving recognition to Elijah's God:

“As surely as the Lord your God lives, I don’t have any bread – only a handful of flour in a jar and a little oil in a jug.” (7: 12)

But Elijah says not to be afraid as God would provide. She was to go home as she planned. But first of all, she is to prepare a small cake of bread for him from what she had and then make some for herself and her son.

The woman was faced with a dilemma:

- if she provided for him there would be even less for her and her son
- could she believe what Elijah said and make that sacrifice?

So she obeys and prepares the bread for Elijah – **her second act of self-denial.**

- **Photo of rice pot (Slide 9)**

God fulfils the promise he made and blesses her richly. She continues to have sufficient flour and oil to provide food for Elijah and her son every day.

### **Conclusion**

The widow had to make the sacrifice in order to receive the blessing of God and her simple act of faith leads to a miracle. Her faith was the step between promise and assurance.

In all of the scripture passages we have considered this morning, everyone who gave, came with something in their hands:

- the widow in the temple had two small coins
- the boy had five barley loaves and two fish
- the woman had a jar of expensive perfume
- the widow of Zarephath had some flour and oil

Each person sacrificed what they had out of a willingness to give from their heart.

- **Photo of rice in hands (Slide 10)**

What do you have in your hand that you can give to help others?

Today we have an opportunity to reflect on what we have and see it as a blessing from God. From this we can then give to others so that they too may be blessed. But we need to be intentional in our prayer and seeking after God as to what it is that we should give. It's not giving our left overs that God desires. It is giving from a willing heart. What are we each willing to sacrificially give?

The Salvation Army's mission around the world is dependent on the giving of others through this Partners in Mission/Self Denial campaign. What will our spiritual act of worship be in the sacrificial giving of ourselves and what we have to the campaign?

- **Photo of boys praying (Slide 11)**

Will you answer the heart cry of God's people?