



## The 'comfort, comfort' of Christmas

Dr Greg Clarke CEO, The Leprosy Mission Australia

One of my favourite parts of the Bible's Christmas story is known as the Nunc dimittis. In English, that translates as "Now dismiss".

These are the first two words of the speech of Simeon in Luke 1:29-32:

**"Now dismiss your servant in peace. For my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the sight of all the nations: a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and the glory of your people Israel."**

I particularly love the fact Simeon is moved to cry out these words while he is giving the child Jesus a bear hug! This scene doesn't get much of a run in Christmas pageants (why not?) but it is extremely comforting for anyone living in troubled times such as we are today.

Simeon, a devout Jew, has been patiently waiting for what God has promised for generations: the arrival of the source of salvation. Simeon obviously knew his Isaiah prophecies, because his words on seeing the baby Jesus echo Isaiah 40: God's "comfort" has arrived: "Comfort, comfort, my people, says your God".

In 2024, we celebrate the 150th anniversary of the founding of the Leprosy Mission's work around the world. Do keep in touch with all that we have planned, and we look forward to seeing you at events around the country.

Now I can relax, Simeon might have said in 2023, because I know God will keep his promises and finish his plans for the world.

But Simeon has more to say. In the verses that follow, he declares that Jesus will be a 'boat-rocker' across Israel, laying bare the hearts of those who encounter him and causing grief even to his own mother. This little child is destined to cause a stir.

Suddenly, the stakes are raised. Jesus is not just a comfort but also the source of righteous judgement. The comfort will come at a cost, and Easter will have to follow Christmas. The comfort of salvation will require great sacrifice. But it will come, despite what we see around us in this troubled world, and with Simeon, we can take Jesus in our arms and praise God, saying "Our eyes have seen your salvation!"

This is the gift of Christmas to all who are waiting, yearning, and suffering: God's plan is unfolding, and the birth of Jesus reveals it to us. It is also a motivating message of certainty for the work of the The Leprosy Mission, as we carry hope and relief to sufferers around the world.

From all at Leprosy Mission Australia, we wish our readers, supporters, and friends a peaceful, relaxing and safe Christmas season and God's blessings for the year ahead. Thank you for being part of our mission in 2023.

2023/12



The Leprosy Mission Australia



"We are tired of not seeing change."

## Keeping in Touch • Issue 12, 2023

By Ana Ivonia, from the Timor Leste Leprosy Peoples' Association. (Transcript of a speech given at the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD))

Thank you for this opportunity.

Distinguished guests, Delegates, ladies and gentlemen, it is my great pleasure and honour to be here and to be the representative of millions of persons affected by leprosy today.

I am Ana Ivonia from Timor-Leste. I am 22 years old, I am the 4th of 6 siblings, and I am currently studying Public Health whilst supporting the work of The Leprosy Mission and the Leprosy Association in Timor Leste.

I was diagnosed with leprosy in 2019, when The Leprosy Mission did health promotion in my village and screened my family. I had skin patches in my left hand big enough for people to see from a distance. It had weakened my fingers and they had started to claw. Those I met would look at me with disgust. The patches had been with me for about 5 years, following me throughout my high school experience. The suffering was not only physical, but mental and social too.

I believe that all of you here experienced physical and social distancing during Covid. Did any of you enjoy that isolation and loneliness? Because of the stigma of leprosy, a preventable, curable, mildly infectious disease, that was my high school

experience. I didn't have friends at high school; even my very closest neighbours didn't want to get close to me. Even today, I feel like I still experience this isolation when people find out that I had leprosy.

This is what the voice of an under-represented person sounds like. Because my story is not unique among persons affected by leprosy. Millions of us have stories of rights stolen; stigma, fear, and discriminatory laws rob us of the right to education, to jobs, to family, to health, and to so much more.

We have heard the global slogan of leaving no one behind, but we still feel we haven't been included yet. If you want to reach under-represented groups of persons with disabilities, you could start with the millions of persons affected by leprosy across Asia, Africa, and South America. You could expand that to the 1.7 billion people like me who are affected by Neglected Tropical Diseases.

If you are listening to my words right now, I ask you, how do you relate to leprosy and to NTDs? How can you ensure our voices and our rights are included? We are organised associations of persons affected, we have strong grassroots networks, we can help you to reach the under-represented voices of young people, older persons, women, people in rural communities, in poor communities, and in small nations like Timor-Leste.

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## CONTINUED FROM FRONT COVER

Across the world, we are looking to partner with the people, organisations, and governments that are represented at this conference. So seek us out and find partnership with us.

We are tired of not seeing change. I ask you to take action so that this Roundtable is more than just words, but becomes about achieving rights. Thank you for your time.

Give thanks and pray for Ana as she dedicates her time to advocate for change, and for human rights for all people, including those affected by leprosy and other Neglected Tropical Diseases.

Pray for Ana as she continues her studies. Pray that this will provide further opportunities for her to be part of seeing change in understanding and attitudes within government departments, and the community in general.

*If you would like to watch and listen to Ana gives this speech follow this link or scan the QR code and then scroll to the bottom of the page*



<https://www.leprosymission.org/our-work/advocacy/ana-ivonias-statement-to-the-crpdc-conference-2023/>

For the first time ever you can use the 5:1 Government Grant to show your compassion to people affected by leprosy in Timor Leste through a monthly gift of tender loving cure (tlc)

<https://www.leprosymission.org.au/tlc521>



# The Leprosy Mission, Government, and You. Achieving great things together.

## Thank you for your loving prayers for the people of Timor Leste.

This country is such a close neighbour of Australia — yet faces so many challenges. Despite its best efforts, the government of Timor-Leste simply cannot provide the medical services you and I take for granted. This means too often people with leprosy are forgotten. Leprosy-healing drugs like Multi-Drug Therapy (MDT) are in short supply. Even a headache tablet can be hard to find.

That is why it is so important for The Leprosy Mission in Timor Leste and the Ministry of Health to collaborate closely together. And why your prayers are so valued and important right now.

Your Improved Leprosy Services (ILS) project staff work in 2 high-endemic districts of Baucau, and Manatuto. Their aim is to work towards elimination of leprosy in these districts. They share this aim with Señor Aparico, Director of the Leprosy Control Program in Manatuto.

Once, leprosy was considered eliminated and so active support for case finding and treatment ceased. Because of this, when Señor Aparico began in his role back in 2015 zero leprosy cases were reported. But leprosy cases were on the rise again.

Since this time, he has seen the case numbers of leprosy rising year after year, revealing that leprosy has been existing and spreading in the community for many years undetected.

In 2023, the ILS narrowed its focus to these 2 districts in order to work more closely with the Leprosy Control Program. During this time Señor Aparico and his team, working together with the ILS team have screened 3,800 people and found new cases, all adults, some with grade 2 disabilities (such as clawed hands) found at diagnosis.

Once diagnosed it is vital that patients receive correct treatment quickly and effectively. The ILS team supports the Control Program team by providing training and supervision to health workers. This is important, both for the patients but also for Señor Aparico's ambitious plans which include screening all 14,000 people in his district of Manatuto.

To celebrate World Leprosy Day, Señor Aparico organised a celebration day, inviting national and district representatives and people affected by leprosy in his district to join together to celebrate and raise awareness of the disease.

Thanks to your prayers and the dedication of the Improved Leprosy Services and Control Program

Above Left: Eva Lee, your International Programs Officer, with Senor Aparico.

Above Right: The ILS team in Timor Leste.

teams to collaborate, people affected by leprosy are being seen, heard, and given the dignity they deserve.

**Pray for the people of Timor Leste as they struggle to access necessary health care. Pray particularly for people affected by leprosy to be diagnosed, access Multi-Drug Therapy and have essential ongoing treatment to care for wounds and disabilities.**

**Give thanks and pray for the partnership between the Improved Leprosy Services and the Leprosy Control Program teams. Pray that this will continue to be a blessing to the people of Timor Leste and especially people affected by leprosy.**

You can continue to show your love and care through the Improved Leprosy Services project here.

<https://www.leprosymission.org.au/projects/improved-leprosy-services>



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Stories marked with this logo are part funded by the Australian Government through the Australian NGO Cooperation Program (ANCP). Thanks to ANCP and our supporters, these projects are able to help improve the well-being of people affected by leprosy and disability.