

Transforming Lives for Good

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Preacher: Mike Royal

[0 : 00] It's a great joy to be with you here this morning. And I'm so excited about the work that you are doing here in partnership with TLG in reaching out to your local schools.

And as an organization, we're overwhelmed by the response of churches, ordinary churches across the country who are seeking to make a difference to the last and the least.

I'm just going to read a short portion of scripture. You can just listen. I'm reading from Isaiah 58.

And it's just a challenge for us to act and to put our faith into practice.

Reading from verse 5, it says this. It says, Is this the kind of fast I have chosen? Only for a person to humble himself.

Is it for one to bow their head like a reed? And for lying on sackcloth and ashes. Is this what you call a fast? A day acceptable to the Lord.

[1 : 17] Is not this the kind of fast I have chosen? Loose the change of injustice. Untie the cords of the yoke. To set the oppressed free.

And to break every yoke. Is it not to share your food with the hungry? To provide the poor wanderer with shelter? When you see the naked, to clothe them. Not to turn away from your own flesh and blood.

Then your light will break forth like the dawn. Your healing will quickly appear. Then your righteousness will go before you. And the glory of the Lord will be your rear guard.

Then you will call. And the Lord will answer. You will cry for help. And he will say, Here am I. If you do away with the yoke of oppression. And the pointing finger and malicious talk.

And if you spend yourselves on behalf of the hungry. And satisfy the needs of the oppressed. Then your light will rise in the darkness. And your light will become like the noonday.

[2 : 17] The Lord will guide you always. He will satisfy your need. In the sun scorched land. And he will strengthen your frame. You will be like a well watered garden.

Like a spring whose waters never fail. Your people will rebuild the ancient ruins. And raise up the age old foundations. You will be called repairer of broken walls.

Restorer of streets. With dwelling. I love that scripture. And the reason why I love that scripture is. Because it speaks to us. Of our personal responsibility. Our personal spirituality as Christians. But also our social responsibility.

For our neighbour. And of course we know our neighbour isn't those who look like us. Who are necessarily from the same side of town as us. Our neighbour are those who are in need.

[3 : 20] As we see so vividly. In the story of the Good Samaritan. That Jesus tells. I can remember.

I'm old enough to remember the conversations that used to happen. Well I'm born and brought up as a Pentecostal. They certainly happened in Pentecostal circles.

Where people used to talk about the social gospel. As though the social bit and the good news were meant to be separate. They never were. They were always meant to be together.

They were always meant to be integral. And I'm constantly asking myself the question. How do we speak the gospel in a way that leads us to follow it up with action?

And how does our social action open up the opportunity for us to share our faith with credibility?

[4 : 18] I love it when the church is credible. I'm proud when the church is galvanised into action. Whether it's Grenfell Tower and that awful happening last year.

Or nearer to home here when the floods took place here in Somerset. What I saw was the church at the forefront of making a difference.

And I think that's what I'm seeing in Clevedon at Christchurch with the TLG Early Intervention Centre. These verses firstly call us to justice.

And Jesus was concerned about justice. He was concerned about the fact that the Pharisees were holding people down. And he wanted to lift them up.

And that's why his words to them were so harsh. It's also the reason why people said no one has ever spoken to us like this man. He was like the people's rabbi.

[5 : 24] God has called us like Jesus to challenge injustice where we see it. When we see it in our banking system, in the loan shark industries, those are obvious candidates.

But I wonder when we look at our education system, what do we see? Well, I see this. I see something like up to 5,000 children and young people excluded permanently from school each year.

I see over a quarter of a million fixed-term exclusions given to children and young people each year.

I see 4,000 six-term exclusions given to children who are under the age of six years old.

That is a huge deal for me. I cannot sleep comfortably in my bed knowing that six-year-old children are being excluded from school.

And so early intervention is not just action. It's actually also a matter of justice. It's not just about pulling people out of the water.

[6 : 33] It's also about going upstream and asking the question, who's pushing them in? It's not just about sending an ambulance to the bottom of the cliff.

It is also about erecting a fence to make sure people don't fall over. And that's what you're doing as a church when you engage in early intervention.

I've sat on and shared all kinds of boards and think tanks around educational failure. And what I've come to as a place is this, is that we can't just leave these issues to the state.

Actually, the state has run out of resources. We have to step up as a church too. And so secondly, there is this call to social action.

Verse 7 says, feed the hungry, give shelter to the homeless, provide for the poor. That's the story of TLG. We were an ordinary church in Bradford working with children.

[7 : 38] On a Friday at youth club, on a Saturday they would come and we had a little burger joint. And they'd come and get their burger and fries and sit down. On a Sunday night they'd be throwing stones at the window.

On Monday morning everyone would breathe a sigh of relief and say, they've gone to school.

Except lots of them weren't. Lots of them were excluded. And Bradford at that time, the education department was really in meltdown.

And so we just rolled up our sleeves and began to work with these young people. And the council got wind of what we did and sent us more. And that was the beginnings of us becoming an alternative education provider.

And for many years that's what we did. And that was my role. I was rolling out alternative provision centres across the country in partnership with churches. Particularly in some of our inner city areas. But Rachel Morphin, who leads early intervention, she was banging a drum in the background saying, you're way too late. You're way too late. You've got to get in early as well.

[8 : 44] And so in 2010 we launched early intervention. Which is simply this. It's one coach giving an hour a week of their time for children in school who for whatever reason might not be thriving.

And giving that time for up to a year for that child. And what we've seen is that when that hour is given a week consistently over time, change happens not just in the child's education but also in their home life.

As well. And we've done work with York St. John's University that has helped us to really get some evidence and proof to the impact of our work.

It's a wonderful way in which the church also can connect with their local schools. I grew up at a time where you sang hymns and song in assembly.

I kind of went to that kind of school. But actually that connection between faith and school has been lost. And we think that early intervention is a really practical and helpful way that the church can re-engage with its local schools.

[10 : 10] If you look back in the 19th to 20th century in particular, our hospitals were often started by churches. Our schools were started by churches.

The Salvation Army became the first social service provider in the country. And, you know, in the 20th century along came the welfare state. And we welcome that.

I'm all for the welfare state. But what we've seen in the last 20, 30 years is a rolling back of that for whatever reasons. And I believe as a church we need to be there in the gaps where people are falling through.

Bill Hybel says that the local church is the hope of the world. A friend of mine, Dr. Mark Boddington, rephrases it like this. Jesus is the hope of the world.

And his church is his primary vehicle. Well, if I can be a vehicle of hope, then I think that's a good reason to be part and parcel of the church.

[11:16] Finally, it says that actually in verse 10a, we are to spend ourselves on behalf of the poor and the hungry.

I love that phrase in the NIV, to spend ourselves. It's a call to social justice, a call to social action. But it's a call to social care.

And I mean that in its broadest sense. We cannot leave social care to just be the domain of the state. God wants us to be a loving church that wraps its arms around the community.

I'm very privileged. My parentage is Jamaican. My family, my parents came over in the 50s as a Windrush generation, which has been in the news a lot this week.

And I'm married to a Ghanaian. And it's very interesting just really picking up some African culture. And one of my favorite African proverbs is this.

[12:20] It takes a whole village to raise a child. A whole village. And this church, our churches, can become that village where we can take care of our children.

Not just those who are of our own, but those in our community as well. A radical way of living and being church in our community.

I think that was the secret of Acts chapter 2 and the growth of the church. May the Lord help us to return to that.

Jesus says, doesn't he, in Matthew 25, whatever we do for others, we do it to the Lord. When you were hungry, you fed me.

When I was thirsty, you gave me something to drink. When I was a stranger, you invited me in. When I needed clothes, you clothed me when I was sick.

[13:23] You looked after me when I was in prison. You came to visit me. I think if Jesus was speaking today, when I was excluded, you included me.

That's what TLG, early intervention, is all about. When we engage in this activity, actually what happens is this.

Is that our light will shine like the dawn. And we will become those repairer of broken walls. And restorer of streets with dwellings.