

Harvest Sunday with Tearfund

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 24 September 2017

Preacher: Stewart Lee

[0 : 0 0] Yeah, my name's Stuart. I'm from Tear Fund. Last time I was here, I was with SIM. I was once at a church recently where, in the past five years, I had been there three times representing three different Christian organizations. It was very confusing. I think they thought I was going through some kind of identity crisis or something. I am here with Tear Fund, and I am fully behind Tear Fund this morning. Before I start, we're going to start by watching a short Tear Fund film. Thank you.

My name is Sylvia, and I live in Tear Fund village in Malawi. I have four children, but my husband left because of the challenges we are facing, and most kids do not have enough food. As a mother, I feel so sad that my children are crying with hunger. I have seen a big change because when I was a girl, the rains used to come consistently, and it was good for farming.

But last year, I harvested four bags of maize from my garden, and I've only got one bag left. In the past, I needed 20 bags to feed my family, but even when we face hunger, I have learned that what is love. So I believe that one day, I will get a break.

Second Kings chapter 4, and just stick your thumb in it just now. We're going to be there in a few minutes' time, but I'm giving you a bit of a heads up. So I work for Tear Fund in Scotland, in the Glasgow office. And one of the great things about working for Tear Fund is every now and again, we get to go overseas. So I'm an event manager. So I spend all my time, like last night, I was out until about midnight. We had a concert, and it went really well.

And then I'm here on a Sunday morning. So I'm doing lots of events, showing people this video, talking a little bit about Africa, about Malawi. But now and again, we get to go overseas.

[2 : 3 3] And I had my opportunity in August just there last month. I went out to Rwanda and Uganda. I had a great time. And what we do is we go out and we visit projects where our church partners are working. And we just ask for stories. We want to hear people's stories. We want to hear what's happening in people's lives and how the programs work. But in this trip, we were getting driven around hundreds of miles all around Rwanda and Uganda by the directors, the Tear Fund directors out there. And they were just giving us so much information about statistics, about poverty alleviation, and how successful the water programs were, and even water engineering facts that I had no idea what to do with. And all these facts and figures, and it was very impressive. And then I came back to Glasgow, and it was a 10-day trip where we were doing 12-hour days, and my brain was fried. And I got back to Glasgow, and I got home, and then my wife asked me, so what was the most impactful thing? What did God teach you? Or, you know, what stood out?

What was the most impactful thing? And actually, there were three people that have stuck in my mind. And I've been telling all my friends about them. Every time I go for dinner, I chat to people about these three people. And the first one was a lady who sat with us and explained to us what her life was like. And we asked, you know, what is it like when you're in poverty?

What is it like when you're in poverty in Rwanda? And she explained to us that things got so bad for her that she couldn't buy a bar of soap to wash with. And over time, she was so poor, she couldn't buy soap. Over time, she wasn't able to wash. It got to the stage where she wasn't able to leave the house, to go to church, to go and meet with other people in the community, community groups, because she was embarrassed because, you know, of feeling unclean. And that just blew me away. And I've worked in South Sudan. I've worked in disaster relief. But this was something where it just gripped me, like not being able to buy a bar of soap and therefore being stuck indoors. How could life get that bad? And the second person that I've been telling people about is a man who, again, were face-to-face chatting, what was life like when things were really bad, what was life like?

And he said, do you know, things got so bad, I couldn't afford new shoes. And I was like, okay. And he said, so my shoes just fell apart as I worked. And then I worked barefoot, you know, every day

going out barefoot working. And then he said, my children, we couldn't replace their clothes as their clothes started to rip and tear and disintegrate again. They had to be pulled out of school because you couldn't go, the rules were you couldn't go to school unless you were appropriately clothed. Again, shocking to hear that's how bad things can get. And then the third person, and it wasn't really a question I asked, we were speaking to a family, a lady who was there with her kids. And the translator actually asked and said, how often did you eat? At the time when she was at the most difficult, challenging part of her life, and how often did you eat? And I thought, what a strange question to ask. I wouldn't have thought to ask that. And she said, twice a week. He said, our family would sit down to a decent meal. We would expect that twice a week when things were at their worst. And I kid you not, I think we asked for a translation twice or maybe even three times. But we couldn't, like that must have been lost in translation. Twice a week. Does she mean twice a day? No, twice a week. And this last one, I think especially on a harvest Sunday, like it's really important to talk about. I'm going to focus on that a little bit today is food poverty and hunger.

[7 : 02] Because that story of that lady who couldn't eat more than twice a week with her family, with her kids, that's actually way more common than you'd believe. You know, it's been a long time since the 80s. It's been a long time since Bob Geldof and Live Aid and Feed the World. But today, things are just as bad. But it doesn't get into the media. It doesn't get into the news. Hunger. People in Burundi, for example, are starving to death. About 1.4 million people are at risk of starving to death in 2017, in 2018. How can this be? Malawi. Malawi, 45% of the population of Malawi are at risk of malnutrition and food insecurity and extreme hunger. That's half the population.

And in Cherambi village, where we saw, Tearfund went in and met with a lady called Sylvia. And this story of Sylvia helps me and hopefully will help us to understand why it is that things can get so bad that people can only afford to eat two meals a week. Sylvia told the church and Tearfund that visited her told them that in the past, she could grow enough maize for 20 of these.

These white bags, this is from Malawi, these white bags are a case of life and death for many people in sub-Saharan Africa and in Malawi. These white bags, case of life and death. In the past, she would expect to grow enough maize for 20, she would harvest 20 bags. And that would be enough.

20 of these, it wouldn't be as light, it would be 45 kilograms, I wouldn't be able to do this. This has just got newspapers and stuff. 20 bags would be enough to eat well every day with her family and sell the excess to buy things like soap and clothes and shoes, school fees, you name it.

And they would expect that. Year after year, they would expect that. Previous generation would expect that. But something is changing and it's the climate. The climate is changing and the 20 bags became 18, became 14, became 10. And when Tearfund met with Sylvia, she had only harvested four of these bags.

[9 : 41] Now she needed 20, she got four. And we met with her when it was six months to go until harvest, and she had just one left. That is what we call the hunger gap. When you've got one bag left, and you've got six months until harvest. It's an extreme version of our, you know, wait until payday, wait until payday. Six months, one bag left. And that's when people have no option but to eat two meals a day, to stretch things, to let their shoes literally disintegrate, not have enough soap.

That's the understand, that's the reason why it all begins with this changing climate. Hunger steals. That's the name of our campaign this year. We're going, in all the events I'm doing, we're saying hunger steals. Hunger is a big problem. For children, it is a thief. It's a thief of energy.

Children aren't able to stay in school. They have to leave school because literally they can't stay in the classroom, can't concentrate because of hunger. Kids are kept awake at night. We've heard numerous testimonies of people saying that their kids are up at night crying because of hunger, and the parents just don't have anything to give them. Kids can't even grow properly. In a malnourished diet, growing up physically, you can't grow properly, and there's all kinds of medical issues.

Hunger steals opportunity. Hunger steals hope. Hunger steals, like I said, your very energy, and it steals freedoms. But the good news, the good news is that the big thief of hunger is being stopped in its tracks by the kingdom of God. And I mean that, and we've seen that, and I saw that in Uganda and Rwanda.

The kingdom of God is at work through the church to stop hunger in its tracks, and all the horrific things that happen when people are pushed to that level of depravity and hunger. Let's turn to 2 Kings and chapter 4, and we're looking at verses 1 to 7. It's the widow's oil.

[12:04] So, it says, The wife of a man from the company of the prophets cried out to Elisha, Your servant, my husband, is dead. You know that he revered the Lord, but now his creditor is coming to take my two boys as his slaves. Elisha replied to her, How can I help you? Tell me, what do you have in your house? Your servant has nothing there at all, she said, except a small jar of olive oil.

Elisha said, Go around and ask your neighbors for empty jars. Don't ask for just a few. Then, go inside, shut the door behind you and your sons, pour oil into all the jars, and as each is filled, put it to one side. She left him, shut the door behind her and her sons. They brought the jars to her, and she kept pouring. When all the jars were full, she said to her son, Bring me another. But he replied, There's not a jar left. Then the oil stopped flowing. She went and told the man of God, and he said, Go, sell the oil, and pay off your debts. You and your sons can live on what's left.

In this story, you've got a widow who is in a desperate situation. She's desperate. She's at her wits end. She's anxious. She's afraid, and she's without hope. She's got nothing left to give.

She's been left a widow, and her sons are about to be taken into slavery. She's in a desperate situation. She comes to the man of God. She comes to the prophet Elisha, and Elisha does something very interesting, and it's not unique. It happens again and again in the Bible. He doesn't just pay off her debts. Maybe he couldn't. Maybe he could, but he doesn't. He doesn't just give her food.

He doesn't just hand something to her to instantly help her in that moment. He does something else. He says to her, What do you have? And in asking her that, What do you have? All of a sudden, she is invited into the process of sorting out the problem.

[14:38] And I believe when I look at that, and you can dispute it if you want, but when I look at that, it makes me think of God's character and how he doesn't want to do things just for us. He wants to do things with us. And I believe that when human beings made in the image of God partner with God, God enjoys solving problems with us. He gets the kids involved. He gets the community involved.

Those neighbors. Yeah, I can help you. All I've got is empty jars, but that's something I can help you with. Do you know? So Elisha gets her involved and also gets the community involved, gets the sons involved, and they work together, and God provides a miracle. He provides a miracle because God is generous and God is bountiful, and he loves to provide for his people. Later on in 2 Kings, later on in the same chapter, you don't have to read it. I can just explain what happens. Another man comes to Elisha with just a little bit of food, and Elisha challenges him to feed all the prophets. There's a hundred.

And he says, that's not possible. And he says, what have you got? Again, what do you have? And he says, I've got, you know, this little bit of food. It's not enough. And then he uses it, and God feeds a hundred people. Sounds familiar? Jesus, our Lord, in John chapter 6, feeds 5,000 people. But the disciples came to him in desperation. We've got 5,000 people to feed and nothing. There's nothing we can do.

It's doom and gloom. What can we do? And Jesus says, what do you have? And he gets the disciples thinking. He gets them working. And they've got the three fish and five loaves, and they're able to feed everyone. Everyone goes to work. Everyone solves it. But God provides the miracle. Now, the reason I'm sharing this today is that this is a principle, a kingdom principle that Tear Fund is using together with the church in sub-Saharan Africa. And honestly, it's making all the difference to ending hunger, to solving the deep-rooted problems that we're facing. We are sick and tired as an organization of short-term quick fixes. We want to get to the bottom of this. Bob Geldof was talking about hunger and Live Aid in 1985, the year I was born, and it's no different now. We want to solve problems, not just provide temporary fixes. So what we do with our church partners, is we come to people like Sylvia, who has her one bag left, and instead of saying, well, we'll give you another bag, which is great. We can give her another bag, and often we do in times of disaster. But what happens when that bag runs out? She's constantly in a place of dependency, and the problem isn't solved. So what we say is, with the church partners, we say, what has God given you already? What has God given you already? You're made in the image of God. Do you realize how precious you are in God's eyes, and how wonderfully made you are? And Sylvia would say in reply, probably at first she would say, I don't have anything. I've got this one bag.

[18:08] But after a while, and usually through the process of Bible studies and community gathering with the churches, people start to say, actually, I've got land. God has provided me with land. Now, this land is not working anymore because of climate change, but God has provided me

with this land. God has given me strength to work. God has given me strength to work. God has given me experience in farming, decades of experience, even generations of experience of farming. And God has given me community.

Sylvia would say, we've got community here. I've got my neighbors that love me and look after me, and I love them and look after them. They've got community. So in that situation, what we have done in Malawi is we have, our church partners have put together the thing that's missing, and that's training. Very simple. Farm sustainable, innovative, modern, not modern, but sustainable, innovative, innovative farming methods, and it's called Foundations for Farming. And we'll go to people like Sylvia and hundreds or even thousands of other people like her, and for 10 pounds is what it costs, we can train that farmer so that in their land that's only producing four bags, they can potentially now, with a little bit of training, with new methods of irrigation, new methods of using the soil. They can grow again their 20 bags. And then she's not in a position anymore to say, I need another bag, I need another handout. But she's able to go with the land that God's given her, with the skills, the abilities, the strength that God's given her, the community that God's given her, and she's able to grow again the 20 bags. We've seen this in the video we saw Polly. Polly is in pretty much the exact same situation as Sylvia, except that she went on the Foundations for Farming course a year ago. And in 2016, Malawi had the worst climate-related disasters they've had in a long time. Flooding and drought, and I think pretty much within 14 months, crops were failing left, right, and center. In that season, Polly was able to grow 16 bags of maize because of the new methods of farming. It's so simple, and it's working. And Polly loves to be able to provide and go and work and provide for family and the community coming together and working with the church. It's a beautiful process when you see it, and I'm so grateful that last month I was able to go and see this happening.

16 bags, and next year I'm sure, I'm sure it will be more. Not only that, Foundations for Farming, this program that the church is using, they also, we train people in business skills. So we're trying to help people to understand that if they have a business as well as agriculture, it's a little bit more robust, a bit more resilient.

So as we saw in the film, Polly started making and selling donuts, and from the proceeds of that, she was able to buy a bike and cycle to pick up water, which probably saved about three hours a day.

[21 : 37] She said something, though, that really stuck in my mind. She said, now I can buy anything I need. And I've heard that a few times when I've been working for Tear Fund.

Now I can buy anything I need. And this is a bit of a tangent from my message, but I need to get it in there because I think it's really powerful. How often in our society did we just hear, I want to be in a place where I can buy anything I want?

Do you know? Anything I want. Whereas seeing the delight in Polly's face and people like her that would say, I'm so grateful to God because now I can buy anything I need.

And that really challenges me and it's challenged my wife to say, what do we need? Do you know? What do we need? Do we need to be saving up for this second car?

Do we need to be, you know, have a second holiday, a third holiday, a year? Or, you know, whatever it is, where is the need become want? And where, you know, where are the lines getting blurred?

[22 : 45] Does that make sense? I hope it does. It's just a little thing that means something to myself. So Sylvia. Sylvia is now going through that Foundations for Farming process.

She's learning how to get the 20 bags from her fields. We are seeing stories like this everywhere. When I was in Rwanda and Uganda, I told you about those three people I met.

Let me give you the update because that wasn't the situation they were in when we met them. They had gone through a similar process of joining self-help groups. And the lady who couldn't buy a bar of soap was now, within two years later, in a very similar process, she owned cows.

She owned cows. Now, if you know anything about Sub-Saharan Africa, places like Malawi and rural Rwanda and Uganda, owning a cow is a big deal. It's probably equivalent to myself trying to strive to get a mortgage and have some property, that kind of financial security.

Owning cattle is high, high, high up economic stability. She couldn't buy a bar of soap and now she's got cows. The man whose shoes were falling off and ended up working without shoes in someone else's fields, he was telling me this story in the middle of his banana plantation, where he'd started with a goat and then pigs and then coffee plants and now he's got a banana plantation.

[24 : 20] And he just is so assured of who he is made in God's image, working with the church and his community, and he feels he can expand, he can do more.

And he's building a house. It was great. It was a wonderful day to meet him. The lady who used to have two meals a day was telling me this, sorry, two meals a week, thank you, was telling me this over a mini banquet that she'd prepared for us nosy Scots that showed up to hear her story.

And I just thought, this is incredible, the turnaround. It's incredible, the turnaround. It's not, and this is not, I'll tell you, the difficult thing about my job is, see, talking about training farmers and sustainable, innovative farming methods, it's not an easy sell.

It's not an easy thing to fundraise for. Believe me, it's really not. But we are absolutely convinced that our job is to look for long-term solutions so people aren't stuck when their handout runs out. Does that make sense? So that's why there's lots of messages I could bring today, but on Harvest Sunday, I really do want to say, this input of training is working.

[25 : 40] Because Sylvia, once she's got that new training up and running, she doesn't need any more help. She doesn't need any more help. She won't want any more help. She's set up.

She's good to go. Jesus said, I love to see the church in action bringing life and restoring relationships in communities.

So many people are becoming Christians through this work, which is focused on helping people out of dire poverty. When people are discovering that through the church, that God is so generous, and God has made them with so much potential, there is no glass ceiling.

That humanity, combined with the Holy Spirit, working with the church, has incredible potential. I want to give you an opportunity. If you feel led, there's little tier fund handouts on every seat.

We would love to put as many people like Sylvia through this training. There are countless, countless amount of people in Sylvia's position that we would love to get through this training.

[27 : 00] It only costs £10 to train a farmer, and then if all goes well, they don't need any more help. So the benefit is phenomenal. We're asking people this year, in all our events, in all our church talks, we're looking for people to give £10 a month, or whatever they feel led to or able to.

£10 a month can train 12 farmers a year. And in the following year, another 12 farmers, etc., etc. If you feel led to be part of this, and to join us in that way, feel free to fill in one of these forms, and hand it to me after.

We'd be very grateful for your support, again, if you feel led. I'm going to close with prayer now. Thank you, Jesus.

Thank you, Jesus, that you modelled to us, you modelled to us what you want your disciples to look like. You never passed by suffering, but you were drawn to suffering, and you called us salt of the world, salt that is used to preserve, and to go into places and prevent decay.

Lord, you've called us to that. We want to be a church that is full of salt, and we want to be a church that's full of light. Lord, and we believe that your power is at work, ending, not just preventing, but ending poverty, and extreme poverty.

[28 : 44] Lord, we love you. We love your church. Lord, thank you for the churches in Malawi, Rwanda, Uganda, Tanzania, so many places that are working tirelessly to pull people out of hunger.

Lord, bless that work. Give them favour. Give every pastor that's involved, give them favour. Lord, we pray for Sylvia. We pray for Chirambi Village.

Lord, I pray that every household there will be able to return to growing 20 bags or more of maize and not have to suffer the way they have in the past few years.

Lord, help us to be a church that you are, that's worthy of your name, just worthy of you, and the way you were, the way you were as we read in the Gospels.

Thank you, Lord. Thank you for this Harvest Sunday, Lord. Thank you for fields that grow, food, Lord, that nourish our bodies. We bless your name, Jesus.

[29 : 53] Amen. We're going to... We're going to... We're going to...