

On your marks

Finding ways to connect with the worldwide family of the Christian Faith has been a growing area of interest both in churches and schools. Such windows into the multi-cultural and international practice of Christianity in today's world are a vital resource to give us a true picture of what it means to be a global Christian in the 21st century. For Christians this is of course also important evidence of the continuing truth and power of the story of Jesus to influence lives and transform societies.

In [A-Cross the World](#), published by Barnabas in 2005, this connection to the big picture was through the symbol of the cross. Differing Christian traditions and various Christian faith communities around the world are united by this one key and central sign of a shared faith. This universal cross has at the same time been interpreted, designed and adapted to express a unique, local expression of that same faith. With each cross comes a particular story of how each community experiences God's love and puts it into action.

Get set

Each of the crosses in this new series supplements the 40 crosses that can already be found in the book [A-cross the World](#). With each there is a Bible link with wondering questions, background information about the cross, stories to share and craft ideas to make a version of the cross - providing enough material for a session with children in a church group, in the classroom or at a mixed-age event. There is also a picture provided for each cross that could be printed or used in a PowerPoint presentation in order to provide a talking point for groups or as a focus for collective worship.

This cross belongs to a series of new crosses and, as with the first collection, the overall aim remains the same, namely:

- to enable children and adults to see the cross through the eyes of other cultures and traditions
- to prompt discussion and debate on why this single, historical event continues to exercise such an influence worldwide
- to explore how Christians in a wide variety of places, different times in history and in different circumstances, have lived purposeful lives because of their faith in a Christ, who died and who is risen - symbolised by the cross

For further cross ideas linked to the church's year, go to:

- [Easter - A resurrection cross;](#)
- [Lent - an ongoing idea for exploring the cross through Lent;](#)

Go!

To view an associated picture for this cross, go to: [A Belgian cross - picture](#)

Bible link

A man with leprosy came to Jesus and knelt down. He begged, 'You have the power to make me well, if only you wanted to.' Jesus felt sorry for the man. So he put his hand on him and said, 'I want to! Now you are well.' At once the man's leprosy disappeared, and he was well. After Jesus strictly warned the man, he sent him on his way. He said, 'Don't tell anyone about this. Just go and show the priest that you are well. Then take a gift to the temple as Moses commanded, and everyone will know that you have been healed.' The man talked about it so much and told so many people, that Jesus could no longer go openly into a town. He had to stay away from the towns, but people still came to him from everywhere.

Mark 1:40-45 (CEV)

In biblical times the word 'leprosy' was used for many different kinds of skin diseases. People thought it was highly contagious, and so anyone with the disease had to live outside normal society, cut off from friends and family.

People with leprosy had to be examined by a priest and told that they were well (that is, 'clean') before they could once again live a normal life in the Jewish community. The gift that Moses commanded was the sacrifice of some lambs together with flour mixed with olive oil.

Wondering about this Bible Story

I wonder why the leper believed that Jesus could heal him? I wonder if he had been told by those kind people who visited the lepers with food? Or had he been watching Jesus from afar?

I wonder what the crowds thought when they saw Jesus touch the leper?

I wonder what Jesus thought about the fact that the leper just couldn't keep quiet about his healing?

The story of this cross

Since early times, many styles and techniques of lace making have been developed, almost all of them in the Belgian provinces, which thus deserve to be named the cradle of lace. Today, two main techniques are practiced in the Flemish provinces of Belgium. The first, a needle lace, is still manufactured in the region of Aalst. It is called Renaissance or Brussels lace because it is mostly sold in Brussels. The second type, the Bobbin Lace, is a speciality of Bruges, a magnificent city located in the west of Belgium. This is a very expensive type of lace to make and is therefore no longer manufactured for commercial purposes.

The delicately woven lace of this cross is not dissimilar to the thin, white patches of skin that are the first signs of the onset of leprosy. Leprosy is a disease of the nerves. It begins with diseased areas appearing on the skin. As the nerves die, so the sufferer loses feeling. For example, if the leper burns or cuts him or herself without knowing, the leper will carry on as if nothing had happened. If the wound is not treated, it will often become poisoned. This leads to loss of limbs, and the skin and bone become damaged. Usually the fingers and toes are lost first. Leprosy also weakens the

muscles, resulting in clawed hands or feet. In other cases the disease spreads quickly and large lumps form on the sufferer's face and ears. The disease also attacks and destroys parts of the body such as the voice box and the nose. Doctors know now that leprosy does not itself kill but it is the results of the disease that cause death. Today, however, it is possible to cure people and help them live a useful life.

One of the most famous people who chose to care for those with this awful disease came from Belgium.

Father Damien was born Joseph De Veuster in 1840 in the village of Tremeloo in Belgium. At the age of 18, he attended a local mission, at which he felt called by God to become a priest. He and his elder brother became members of the congregation of the Sacred Hearts of Jesus and Mary, known sometimes as the Picpus Fathers, and he took the religious name of Damien. His brother was due to go out to South Seas as a missionary but because of illness was unable to take up his post. Father Damien persuaded the authorities to let him take his brother's place, even though he had not yet been ordained priest. He arrived in Hawaii in 1863, where he was ordained. He spent nine years as a parish priest on the island before volunteering for the leprosy settlement on Molokai in May 1873.

Some of the people from his churches suffered from leprosy and had been ordered by the authorities to be taken to the island settlement. He knew the unhappiness that the families went through. As a result, when the bishop asked for volunteers to go to Molokai, he spoke up. This was to become his life's work. He spent almost 16 years on the island.

There were 800 people living on the island when he arrived, housed in two villages. Their homes were poorly made and, although there was a hospital, it did not have a doctor or even bandages or medicines. Father Damien worked hard to win the people's trust and improve life for the lepers in the colony. Slowly life in the settlement began to change. It was not just the new homes and a new water supply; something had changed for the people too. They began to realise that there was someone who loved them and who cared about what happened to them.

One problem with which Father Damien was faced was the large numbers of children on the settlement left alone because their parents had died. After three years Father Damien built a house to shelter a group of homeless girls. Later a home was opened to care for about 40 boys. He never forgot their education too. Whenever he had the chance, he used to hold lessons in the open air. He also rebuilt the hospital and was overjoyed when finally a doctor volunteered to arrive and take care of patients, bringing medicines that could control, though not at that time cure, leprosy.

Father Damien always knew that one day he too would catch the disease. News of his illness spread to the newspapers and the sacrifice that he had made was told round the world. As a result, money and gifts began pouring in. Following his death it seems that people began to pay proper attention to leprosy for the first time. In England, the Prince of Wales (later King Edward VII) was very moved by Father Damien's story and arranged for a large cross from the people of Britain to be set up on Molokai to remember the priest's work. Underneath are written the words: *'Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends'* (John 15:13 AV). Later the King of Belgium arranged for the Damien's remains to be brought back to his home country.

Christians today still support the work of caring for those with the disease of leprosy, particularly through aid agencies such as The Leprosy Mission International. This is a leading non-denominational Christian organisation with over 130 years experience in leprosy work.

Leprosy afflicts individuals and communities, and so The Leprosy Mission (TLM) is committed to doing all it can to break its power and impact. This means not just providing a cure but also addressing the underlying causes, working to prevent disability and to restore dignity and wholeness to people and communities affected by leprosy around the world.

Many ancient churches have what is called a 'leper's window' in the wall of the chancel. It was through this window that lepers could 'come close' to the heart of worship and see what was going on without any risk to the worshipping congregation.

Here is a prayer for those with leprosy from The Leprosy Mission Australia:

Almighty Father, the giver of life and health, look mercifully on those who suffer from leprosy. Stretch out your hand to touch and heal them as Jesus did during his earthly life. Grant wisdom and insight to those who are seeking the prevention and cure of the disease; give skill and sympathy to those who minister to the patients; reunite the separated with their families and friends; and inspire your people with the task set before The Leprosy Mission, that it may never lack either the staff or the means to carry on its healing work, in accordance with your will, and to the glory of your holy name.

Crafting the cross

You may have someone in your school or church who knows how to make lace - if so it would be an ideal opportunity to show this particular skill to your group.

Making a cross-stitch cross is a related alternative.

You need something to stitch on. You can get sheets of plastic canvas from the needlework workshops or wide-meshed canvas; white cotton or wool; wide-eyed needles and scissors.

Cut out the plastic mesh the shape of a cross, or, if using canvas, lightly pencil on the shape of a cross.

Give everyone a needle and ask them to make a cross-stitch around the edge of the mesh cross to represent all the people on the edge that Jesus reached out and touched, like the lepers. Jesus calls his followers today to come close to those about whom no one else bothers. You could do this either as activity together, making one cross, or each could have his or her own cross to stitch. You might point out that the cross-stitches that they are sowing also look a bit like kisses, reminding us of God's love reaching out to those in need.

Cross Reflection

Father Damien chose to follow the way of Jesus. Like his Lord he entered completely into the pain



and suffering of those he loved. His mission was a response to the words of Jesus about the cross in Matthew 16:24-26 (CEV):

Then Jesus said to his disciples: If any of you want to be my followers, you must forget about yourself. You must take up your cross and follow me. If you want to save your life, you will destroy it. But if you give up your life for me, you will find it. What will you gain, if you own the whole world but destroy yourself? What would you give to get back your soul?