

## Gladys Aylward Sermon by George Castle

Sunday 14 March 2021 09.30

In our sermon series we have been looking at heroes of our faith and in the 8 & 9.30 Services we have covered Polycarp Josephine Butler Saints Perpetua and Felicity whilst the Family service have studied Daniel and his friends Shadrach Meshach and Abednego.

So I want to ask you all a question do you think you are an ordinary person or a special person ?

We have definitely got some special people in church today...can all the mothers stand up/.

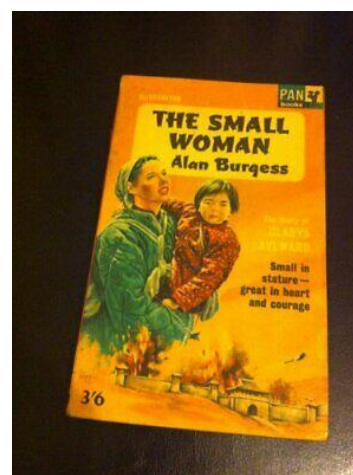
They definitely do a very difficult job: they have to be kind and patient and LOVE tidying up and not getting much sleep , very clever with schoolwork,homework, homeschooling and answering difficult questions in between, making cakes and lots of other things.

Today we are especially thanking God for our mothers and all that they do

### **But do you think that you have to have children to be a mother?**

I am going to tell you a story today about Gladys Aylward...she didn't have any children herself but she became a mother to many children.

She thought she was a very ordinary girl but she became a very special person to a lot of people.. she has had books written about her and even a film which actually wasn't very accurate so let **me** tell **you** her story:



She was a housemaid who loved dancing and one afternoon was on her way to a dance with her great friend Queenie. They got separated and Gladys was caught up in a crowd of people going into a church for an evangelistic meeting: the preacher was highlighting the enormous need for missionaries to China and during this address Gladys was

overwhelmed by the love of God **for her** and left the meeting **totally changed** and **totally determined** to raise support to send missionaries to China .

She applied to the China Inland Mission and was accepted on a preliminary three-month course for aspiring missionaries, **but** she really struggled with all that **learning** and most of all with learning the Chinese language. She was so upset when her training was terminated due to her lack of progress.

Undeterred Gladys challenged everybody she met about whether God was calling **them** to be missionaries until one day her exasperated brother retorted

***if you are so sure God wants missionaries in China why don't You go.***

***Her brother's words had really shocked her*** she prayed and became convinced that God wanted **her, Gladys** in China. The circumstances around her decision and the fascinating twists and turns in this episode of her life are incredible to read but suffice to say Gladys went back into service to raise the £45 needed for a train ticket on the Trans-Siberian railway to Yangcheng.

She had many close encounters with disaster and death on this long journey including straying into a war zone and being detained by the Russians, she managed to evade them with local help and escaped via a Japanese trawler. She travelled across Japan with the help of the British Consul and took another ship to China. She had many close encounters with disaster and death on this long journey but eventually arrived in Yangcheng.



Working with an older missionary, Jeannie Lawson they established a guesthouse called the Inn of the Eight Happinesses for the muleteers travelling across the region. The Chinese people loved stories and story-telling so Jeannie would spend the evenings telling the muleteers stories of Jesus and many came to faith.

Being immersed in the culture enabled Gladys to learn the language that she had struggled so hard with back in the UK, but disaster struck after a year when Jeannie Lawson died and 30 year old Gladys was left running the Inn. Jeannie's pension had been supporting the Inn but now there was no income. Gladys prayed and help came from **the** most unexpected source.

The local Mandarin asked Gladys for help in enforcing the new law to eradicate the dreadful practice of binding young girls feet leaving them crippled and unable to walk more than a few paces without pain.

You can see in this picture that the girls are wearing tiny shoes with a pointed toe.

## Girls with bound feet wearing special shoes



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In this next picture these are the little shoes that the girls would wear to cover their poor misshapen feet. My little goddaughter Scout has very kindly lent me her shoes.

**These** (Scout's shoes) are BIGGER than the shoes in the picture. Scout is 1 and her shoes are bigger than those of an adult woman.





The Mandarin explained to Gladys Aylward :

**You have big feet and you are a woman**

**Big feet means that you can walk and travel to the villages to educate and prevent this practise... only a woman can do this.**



A comparison between bound feet (left) and normal feet.

Gladys agreed on the one condition - that she could talk about Jesus. The mandarin also agreed, and Gladys became a foot inspector for the Government of the Republic of China and therefore received a salary!

Gladys was really successful in this work! Previous foot inspectors had experienced resistance and violence but Gladys was shown great reverence and rapidly gained enormous respect from the Mandarin and the whole region. She was known as Ài Wěi Dé meaning 'Virtuous One'

**And all the time** Gladys carried on telling stories about Jesus to the homes and families she visited.

She quelled a violent prison riot and became involved in prison reform and rehabilitation so her reputation for great kindness grew and she risked her life many times to help those in need.

The Inn had now become an orphanage coping with huge numbers of abandoned children and Gladys had adopted a number of the children herself.



Gladys Aylward with some of the children before they crossed the mountains to Sian

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In 1938, she faced her greatest challenge when the region was invaded by Japanese forces and Gladys led more than 100 orphans over the mountains, and across the Yellow River to safety. It took 27 days to travel over 100 miles, Gladys was the only adult and most of the children were aged between 4 and 8. Having reached Xian safely Gladys collapsed with mental and physical exhaustion and typhus fever taking many months to recover.

She remained in China for another 11 years only returning to Britain in 1949 when her life was in great danger from the Communists. Settling in Basingstoke, she recorded many lectures about her work in China. After her mother died, Gladys tried to return to China but was rejected by the Communist government after a brief stay in British administered Hong Kong, she finally settled in Taiwan in 1958. There, she founded the Gladys Aylward Orphanage, where she worked until her death in 1970.

**So today on Mothering Sunday** what can we learn about this particular hero of faith? And how does this fit with our reading from St. Mark's Gospel?

The gospel describes the disciples trying to protect Jesus from pushy parents wanting Jesus to bless their children.

Perhaps the disciples thought that the children were unimportant, that Jesus had far better things to do like teaching adults and healing the sick than to be distracted with grubby snotty little people. The disciples must have been quite embarrassed then when Jesus told them off and instead emphasized the **importance** of children, that they should be encouraged to seek God and **in fact** the **adults** needed to learn from the children!

So what is it that we adults need to learn from our children? I think it is the simplicity with which children accept situations. Children are open and receptive they don't have the barriers that we adults use to filter or judge or weigh up our response to God.

And I think this is so well demonstrated in Gladys: she was a simple uneducated girl and yet when she heard that evangelistic message she responded wholeheartedly. **Jesus had died for her** ..quite simply her response was that *her life should now be lived for God*.

Secondly when it dawned on her that **she** was the missionary that God was calling she pursued her plan with great determination ..please do watch some of the remarkable documentaries in which Gladys herself describes her desperation to reach China.

How amazing that the Mandarin was so concerned with Gladys "**big feet**" that he gave permission to tell the Jesus stories whilst she visited homes to unbind and release those tortured little feet.

What are your "**big Feet**" the unique skill or gift or opportunity that enable you to influence a situation around you.. and are you using that opportunity especially in these times where the pandemic has provided openings to show love kindness and support to so many who are struggling around us.

Gladys did struggle she was very lonely after Jeannie died, she yearned for a husband, companionship and she yearned for her own children.

God did however give her children: she personally adopted several from the orphanage and there are multiple letters to her sons and daughter many of whom became Christians and missionaries and there is this lovely photo of Gladys with her first grandson

So today as we remember mothers and thank God for them we also remember those who have loved and nurtured other peoples children just as Gladys did .

We thank you Father God for your overwhelming love for us, help us to come to you as little children recognising our dependence on you and in turn to share your love with others.

We are challenged by Gladys Aylward an ordinary small woman but with extraordinary determination and doggedness. Help us like Gladys to recognise our **“bigfeet” opportunities** so that we can use put faith into practice .

**Amen**

**References:**

**Wikipedia!**

Tiny slippers for bound feet: From the Gladys Aylward collection SOAS:

[Chinese small red slippers \(first pair\) from the Gladys Aylward collection \(soas.ac.uk\)](https://www.soas.ac.uk/collections/1381511/)

China Map : [Gladys-Aylward-s-Reise-nach-China-1381511.png \(640×360\) \(stepmap.de\)](https://www.stepmap.de/stepmap/1381511/Gladys-Aylward-s-Reise-nach-China-1381511.png)

Documentary by Vision Video, based on the book by Carol Purves is excellent and includes recordings of Gladys herself. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6jX09pOlolE>

Animated story for children (34 minutes) available at

<https://torchlighters.org/heroes/gladys-aylward/>