



Sermon preached by Tara Qu on 25th May 2025

Readings: *Psalm 34; Romans 10:10–19; John 14:23-29*

Easter VI

The Sharing Together Time: - "God Sends Us Too!"

What is the most memorable thing in your life? The most memorable thing for me was my wedding about 10 years ago. How about you? Would it be your first birthday cake, your first day of school, or falling down and getting a plaster?

You know what? God remembers everything, too. There have been so many great things that happened in the past, in Cambridge, in this church, but sometimes, we are a little forgetful. Today, I am going to share with you the story of a family who used to attend Emmanuel URC, Cambridge a long time ago. Because they lived such a long time ago, now not many people have memories of them anymore. Their story is about the love for science, love for the Chinese people and understanding between different cultures. They are the Lapwood family.

Ernest Ralph Lapwood, just known as Ralph Lapwood, was a teacher and a Christian. He was very bright and became a mathematics teacher. He and his wife Nancy Lapwood went all the way to China in the 1930s to do God's work. He worked in a big school like the University of Cambridge, in Beijing, and helped build up the mathematics department there. Isn't that cool? Mr. Lapwood and Mrs. Lapwood even wrote a book about their adventure in China! They became friends with their students, helped them with their studies and their faith.

When Ralph Lapwood worked at Yenjing University in Beijing, before he was married to Nancy, he didn't live in the faculty residence, which provided better accommodation. Instead, he chose to live in a standard student's room, sharing a bathroom with them, and even refused to have a designated seat in the dining hall. Lapwood would carry his washbasin and towel down the student dormitory's hallway to wash his face and do laundry in the cramped washroom. He was the only faculty member who did that. In order to stay close to his students, and help them better, he refused a life of comfort and chose the hard way. This tells us that he didn't put his self-interest before his service to God. Mr Lapwood won his students' respect with sincerity, kindness, and professionalism.

One of his students, Zhou Shunxin once recalled: "Mr Lapwood always came to class fully prepared, lectured in a clear and organised manner, and held high standards for his students. But if anyone had questions, he was always extremely patient, never tiring, and gave his utmost to guide us."

What can we learn from the Lapwood's story?

1. God Sends Ordinary People to Do Extraordinary Things

God sends everyone—teachers, students, even children—to show their love around the world.

In Isaiah 6:8, *God called Isaiah to be a prophet. The Bible says, "Then Isaiah heard the voice of the Lord saying, 'Whom shall I send?' And Isaiah replied, 'Here am I. Send me!'"* So when God calls you, what should you say?

2. True Servants of God Live Humbly

Lesson: Mr. Lapwood could have lived in a fancy house and had a special seat, but he chose to live like his students. That's how Jesus lived—he lived humbly, and was always helpful to others.

It reminds us of a passage in Matthew 20:26 "*Whoever wants to be great among you must be your servant.*"

Closing Prayer with Children:

Let's pray: Thank you, God, for the Lapwood family, who showed your love across the world. Help us to be kind, to listen, and to share your love with our friends. Amen."

The Sermon

Ralph and Nancy Lapwood served in China during a time of great political upheaval—the Japanese invasion, Chinese civil war, and the rise of communism. They faced rapid changes in the Chinese society, and managed to become great learners and witnesses for the Christian faith. In one of their confidential letters to their friends, they wrote, Chinese Christians “think of Jesus as a manual worker, one of the proletariats, and consequently in inevitable opposition to the exploiting groups – Romans, Pharisees, and such like. The idea of the Cross is kept in the front of their thinking; his objective “to preach the gospel to the poor,” “to preach deliverance to the captives,” etc., are most prominent. They find their own faith strengthened by his continual struggle in which Satan was involved, and his own statement that he came to bring “not peace but a sword.” They regard his recorded evidence that scorn, scathing criticism, and hatred were part of his life (directed not at men as men, but at men as oppressors or tools of an evil or exploiting order). At the same time, they see this as God’s personal intervention into history, his judgment on human pride and redemption of human life.” While this view carries a tone of liberation theology, which could be difficult for some ears, the Lapwoods showed clear understanding of the Chinese Christian faith in the context of great struggles.

Here we may get a false impression that the Lapwoods must have been very popular among the Chinese people. However, their letters show a complex picture about their role and life in China. They probably never lived free from controversy, not only from the Chinese people but also from their home community, because of their “pro-communist” views. In a letter from December 1951, they wrote, “Most Chinese Christians agree to the view that the coming of Christianity to China was unfortunately closely associated with foreign imperialist demands. For instance, early unequal treaties (through the victory of the opium wars, etc) stipulated among other things that missionaries should be allowed to live and preach freely. Early missionaries were often close to consular and other officers, and Catholic missionaries in particular sometimes did intelligence work for foreign governments. It is very unfortunate that in recent years some American missionaries have been closely associated with Chiang Kai Shek and the Kuomintang (the government before the Chinese Communist Party). Chinese Christians also consider that the Chinese church was in many ways un-Chinese – most church buildings were built in foreign style, our hymn books carry much English, services are modelled on those of the western countries, and the church was in many or perhaps most places financed largely with foreign funds. In earlier years not much general criticism was expressed against these things, but now Chinese friends, with new patriotism and pride, regard them as rather shameful. They also feel that the Communist party has indeed put its finger on the real reasons for China’s chronic weakness in the past hundred years – the semi-feudal structure of society internally, and the semi-colonial relationships externally – and they blame the church for being blind to these reasons. Thus most of the Chinese Christians whom we know feel that the church has stood in real need of “spring-cleaning” – to get rid of the foreignisation, the tendency to depend on others, and the lack of understanding of China’s real problems and hopes. Hence the Movement for self-government, self-support, and self-propagation, and the willingness to make a clean break with the missionary past so as to be ready at some future date to resume relations on an equal basis.”

You can see in these letters that, although with great difficulty, the Lapwoods was trying to act as a bridge-builder between China and the west.

The Lapwoods book *Through the Chinese Revolution*, is a powerful account of history and of the Christian heart. They did not romanticise mission in this book. Instead, they wrote about the suffering, the misunderstandings, and the moments of grace. They showed that “evangelism is not about getting people to agree with us quickly, but about walking with them in love”. Nancy wrote:

“We didn’t talk about politics or ideologies, but about people—Chinese people of all kinds, many of whom we knew personally.”

When we talk about love, we do not reserve the most beautiful words from expressing its greatness. It’s such an abstract concept, that has drawn many great thinkers and writers to explore its great work.

However, “Loving people in theory is easy; loving actual individuals is hard”. The general, idealized love for “humanity” is much easier than the messy, demanding love required in real

relationships with actual people. In this sense, Lapwoods have practiced love which the LORD Jesus Christ has taught us.

Even today, Dr. Lapwood's name is remembered for his academic integrity and relational approach.

we can also learn something about mission and evangelism from the Lapwoods.

1. **Mission is relational** – It begins with friendship and mutual respect.
2. **Mission is patient** – It does not rush decisions but plants seeds of hope.
3. **Mission is educational** – It values knowledge, language, and culture.

Of course, the idea of mission today is very different from what it used to be. In the past, it often meant missionaries from the West going to the East. But now, mission is no longer one-directional — it's global, mutual, and rooted in partnership and presence. It's from everywhere to everywhere. There are African missionaries in Europe, Chinese missionaries in the UK, Korean missionaries in the US, bringing gospel back to the west.

In the hall of Westminster College, there is a yearbook on display. In the year of 1948, a young man from Taiwan is among the mostly white student community. His name is Lv Zhenzhong. He came to Westminster College to deepen his understanding of the Scripture and the biblical languages. He spent 30 years to complete one of the most respected Chinese translations of the Bible. His work helped millions read the Bible with clarity and dignity. The legacy of Westminster College and Cambridge and the URC does not only survive in this Bible translation, but also in the spiritual impact on Lv's family. Now his grandson, Henry Lv, serves in a church in the UK, continuing the mission work that the URC and Westminster College started during the last century.

Friends, today we continue a story that began many years ago—one of faithfulness, learning, and crossing boundaries for the sake of the Gospel. Today, we're talking about mission that begins with presence, patience, and partnership.

Conclusion: Our Mission Today

You may not be called to Beijing. But you are called—to be a witness to your neighbour, your colleague, your classmate. The world still needs people who will walk humbly, speak wisely, and love deeply.

Closing Prayer:

God of all nations, thank you for those who have gone before us. Make us faithful witnesses of your love - in our words, our friendships, and our actions. Help us to learn, to listen, and to live your good news every day. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Tara Qu

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