

NORTH BALWYN UNITING CHURCH

SUNDAY 12 FEBRUARY 2012

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2 Kings 5: 1-14; Psalm 30; Mark 1: 40-45

“Clean”

Reading the story of Naaman one could well ask: Is this a story about a mud bath or a baptism? Is it a story about a miracle cure or is it a conversion? It's hard to tell, as is more often the case with stories in scripture, especially in the Old Testament.

On the surface the story is about Naaman, an officer in the army of the king of Aram recovering from a skin disease. He is cured by submerging in the muddy waters of the river Jordan, a bit like what happens nowadays in resorts where skin diseases are treated with dead sea salts or thermal mud packs. But, Naaman does not only rise from the waters of the Jordan with a clean skin, Naaman also rises as a changed man.

It's a wonderful story, full of mild humour, and with a wonderfully deep insight in human nature. In it the writer of the story continually plays around with contrasts: of people great and small, important and insignificant, master and slave, king and servant.

Naaman, the main character of the story is a rather grand individual, an important officer in the army of the king of Aram, and held in high esteem by him, a master of many slaves, and owner of large estates. Aram being a neighbouring country of Israel, placed somewhere in present day Syria. The relations between the two countries, even then, somewhat strained.

However, although Naaman is greatly respected and a powerful man, he has this dreadful illness.

Then there is a girl, a young girl, kidnapped from her native country Israel and now serving as a slave girl in Naaman's household (we're talking about somebody damaged here, somebody with every right to be resentful and who refrains from being cooperative or helpful). It is this girl that rises above her own troubles to point her master towards the prophet with a few simple words: "If only my lord could go to the prophet in Samaria...."

That's all we hear about the girl. She doesn't get any rewards, she only directs her master towards salvation. Insignificant she may seem, and small her contribution, it is clear that without her nothing would ever have happened. Naaman gets permission from the King to go and seek a cure for his illness in Israel, and armed with a letter from his own king he presents himself to the king of Israel: "See, I send Naaman my servant to you, so you will release him from his leprosy."

Mind, there is not a word about the prophet here, it's just one king assuming that the other king has all the necessary power to direct his underlings as he pleases. And there is some arrogance there too: one king commanding the other king to release his servant from his illness..... or else.... Something that fills the king of Israel with dread: "What does he think? That I am God? He must be looking for an excuse to start another war...."

Fortunately, Elisha then takes the situation in hand: "Send him to me, I'll deal with him" - exposing the king of Israel as clearly not too strong on the faith front.

When Naaman then, with all his carriages and horses appears before Elisha's front door, the scruffy old prophet from Israel, doesn't even deign to venture outside to welcome his important guest and talk to him. "You go, wash yourself seven times in the river Jordan."

What! ME! Go wash myself in that stinky muddy trickle? After a reception like this? As if we don't have much better and cleaner rivers at home! Who does this fellow think he is?

Does he realise who he is talking to?

Naaman, hero of battlefields, veteran of many wars, feared by his enemies, held in high esteem by his king.... You can't possibly leave someone like that on your doorstep and dismiss him with such humiliating advice?

Just imagine, you're this really very important person, met with respect and awe wherever you go. You're not well, and you haven't been for years, you've tried everything and nothing has made any difference. And then somebody recommends this miracle worker to you. You travel a couple of hundred miles, go through all sorts of trouble, and when you get there, first you get redirected to a mud brick hut and then this person doesn't even come out to talk to you. "Go, wash yourself is the advice divulged to you by a servant, and not even clean water is provided to do it in."

"I thought he'd come out and stand, and call the Name of his God and move his hand over the spot of my leprosy and take it away...."

Naaman feels this is just too humiliating. He feels cheated. He came prepared to pay huge amounts of money to be cured, he would have done anything, but submerging himself in muddy insignificance is really the limit!

Would you like to be saved like that?

Probably not! And this is only human: we tend to not trust things that are too easy. We like to work for our salvation, make sacrifices, follow complicated instructions. It makes sense!

Naaman is disappointed. All he had expected, but this.....

His servants intervene. Perhaps it is easier for those who live from grace to grace on a daily basis to appreciate something good when it presents itself.

It is the insignificant people, the small slave girl and the servants who act as instruments of God's healing in the story, the great and grand dependent on them for their salvation.

Naaman listens to reason, showing he really is a great man, even if a bit arrogant and on a short fuse at times. He submerges into the river Jordan seven times, as the prophet has told him. And the seventh time he rises from the waters with the skin of a newborn baby.

End of story? Not quite.....

Cleansed from all impurities – his illness, his despair, his bitterness, his anger, his frustration, his arrogance - Naaman is generous with his praise and eager to pay his debts. "Now I know that in all the earth there is no other God than the god of Israel, please accept a present of your servant."

Offering gifts was a valid and common way of bringing thanks to the gods in religion as Naaman knows it. Tit for tat, God does something for you, you do something for God. With religion a tool for keeping the balance straight.

A form of religion that is, unfortunately still rampant, even in present day Christianity. God is good to you, you are good to God. Does misfortune happen? You blame God and turn away. It's as easy as that. An attitude that changes the relation with God into trade and his goodness into something that can be bought, with alms and good behaviour. Ten talents of silver, 6000 shekel gold, and 10 gala suits... It is a fortune that Naaman offers to the God whom he owes his life to. Equal money for equal value?

Obligation free gifts make us suspicious: "Where is the catch, there must be a bill to pay somewhere!" Naaman can't buy off his gratefulness. He has to recognise that he owes somebody, that he owes God, everything, his life. Most of us don't like to be indebted to anyone in such a significant way. It takes away control, it makes us feel dependent and vulnerable.

Another thing is that Naaman dreads going back, because he knows he will have to compromise, "What will I do when my lord bows down in the temple of Rimmon, and I bow with him, because I can't do differently? Will God forgive me?"

The answer from the prophet is simple: "Go in peace." Go in peace to love and serve the Lord as we often say at the end of a Church service. There really is no need to worry, what God gives, God gives for free and what you do with God's gift is up to you. Praise and serve God where you can, but if you can't, God is compassionate and full of grace.

It is ironic that this concept of free grace, of not having to pay anything back, eludes the one who lives closest to the prophet who proclaims it. Gehazi, the man whose name means 'bulging eyes' cannot resist the temptation of those bulging saddlebags full of money.

Gehazi gets what Naaman had shaken off. The old self that Naaman left behind when submerging in the river Jordan is laid upon Gehazi to live with. Now leaving him in want of that grace no money can buy. Greed, disobedience and lack of consideration for a vulnerable new faith leave him infected with an incurable disease.

Where do we stand? Are we part of the new creation, free to heal and save what we can with compassion and understanding like the prophet Elisha? Or are we closer to Gehazi with the bulging eyes? Are we ready to receive salvation, absolutely free? Or are we more attracted to the idea of paying God back with good works and big sacrifices to keep the books balanced?

We all have some Gehazi in us, we all find it hard at times to resist temptation and stay within the circle of God's grace and mercy. But there is also some of Naaman in all of us, longing for healing, prepared to adjust, to listen, to get off our high horses and come clean before God and ready to serve him. There is even something of the heroic prophet in most of us, rising above the earthly order of power and authority to the realm where God's love reigns supreme. And last but not least most of us will even feel like the king of Israel at times: Ready to rend our garments because we really don't know how to bring healing and peace to the world.

And, at times, we may even be the servants who talk their master into something they also really don't know will work, or the little slave girl who with a simple word sets something in motion that is far beyond her.

We're all that, fragile people under constant threat of losing ourselves to temptation. People accepted by God, loved by him, healed by him, called to live the life of Christ and be part of the new creation.

And where we are prepared to ask for healing we may expect to receive it. To be touched by a power beyond ourselves that will help us become clean and whole like the leper in the gospel story, like Naaman in the Elisha story. Knowing it to be free grace, free of charge, with Jesus, if need be, even prepared to change places with us. Take our pain and isolation, our loneliness and suffering and transform our lives in such a way we can't but shout it from the rooftops: Something has happened to me, someone has changed my life, I am carrying a tiny bit of Kingdom soil close to my heart because grace has invaded my life!

Amen.