

## Naaman, leprosy and humility - 4 July

*2 Kings 5: 1-14; Ps 30; Galatians 6: 1-18; Luke 10: 1-24*

This morning's OT reading is one of those stories that has a happy ending. The story of Naaman being cleansed of leprosy. Stories are so important to us, to link us into the message and the meaning that lies behind. We do remember more readily when the message is placed in a story. So with the story of Naaman, and the healing of his leprosy. So with the continuing story of God's love for all of humankind.

The context: Naaman was an important man, commander of the army of the King of Aram. Second in power and authority to the king. We are told he was a great man in the sight of his master and highly regarded, because through him the Lord had given victory to Aram. Note that the victory was attributed to the Lord, who was seen to rule the destinies of all nations, not only Israel. All was going extremely well in his life.

He was a valiant soldier, and then the catch, but he had leprosy.

We may wonder about why he was still in that position as commander when he had leprosy. We have heard and read of the way people with leprosy were treated in biblical times, there are clear restrictions on their movements and rules for their exclusion from society, to prevent the possible spread of infection (Leviticus). So, here, Naaman has an enormous problem. What would happen to him? There was no known cure for leprosy at that time; it was obviously going to get worse. It obviously could not be kept secret that he had leprosy, because even the young Israelite servant girl of Naaman's wife, said: "If only my master would see the prophet who is in Samaria! He would cure him of his leprosy." The young, un-named girl knew of the power of God to heal, although the word used is cure, not heal.

So Naaman goes to the king of Aram who provides him with a letter to the king of Israel. Naaman set out on his journey carrying the letter and gifts of silver, gold and clothing.

The king of Israel reads the letter, and his response was very clear, recognising the power of God: "Am I god? Can I kill and bring back to life?"

The prophet Elisha heard all of this; he sent the king a message: “Have the man come to me and he will know there is a prophet in Israel.”

I love the next bit, where it says, “So Naaman went with his horses and chariots and stopped at the door of Elisha’s house.” Imagine on a quiet morning the whole lot arriving at the prophet’s house. And does the prophet come out and meet and welcome Naaman? No, he simply sends out a message: “Go wash yourself seven times in the Jordan, and your flesh will be cleansed.” Note, it says, cleansed, not cured. The term cleansing is associated with wholeness and healing rather than with cure. Cleansing is also the term used by Jesus in his healing of people who have leprosy.

But, back to the story. Naaman, outside the prophet’s house, with all his status, horses, chariots, gifts. He just gets a message from the prophet. He wasn’t happy! In fact he was angry! And he says: “I thought that he would surely come out to me and call upon the name of the Lord his God, wave his hand and cure me of my leprosy.” Then he goes on to rant about the rivers of his own land, that he sees as much greater than this river, the Jordan. So off he goes in a rage. His pride has taken a beating.

There are some very important supposedly small players in this story, who prompt and persuade. And the good thing is that Naaman is persuaded. First it was the servant girl, who alerted him to the possibility of healing, now there are his servants, respectful, but with an important and wise message for their master: “My father, if the prophet had told you to do some great thing, would you not have done it? How much more then, when he tells you, ‘Wash and be cleansed!’”

The message. An important man, used to giving orders, a respected man. He moved in high circles. Now he had leprosy, he faced losing everything he had, his high position, his livelihood, his family, his self respect. So why didn’t he just take the word of the prophet as spoken and do as he said? He reacted angrily. His pride was hurt.

To be cleansed, first he had to become humble. It is very hard to become humble. Humility is one of the gifts of the spirit, and the more we would seek it, the more it eludes us. Humility has taken a slide in

importance in modern societies and is taking a long while to recover. There days, people who are humble get walked over.

And yet, could there be changes? Changes that might cause us to re-think? A couple of weeks ago I was at a conference in North Carolina and one of the researchers was speaking about health and religion and spirituality. His work had been in associating the relationship between humility and health. He actually found, using good research methods, that there is a positive relationship between humility and healing.

What does that say to us? Simply, that God has been right, all along. We just want scientific proof these days before we will believe, perhaps a new kind of human arrogance.

But, back to Naaman. Does he let go of his pride and accept the prophet's words, encouraged by his servants? Yes, he does. And so he is cleansed.

We read then of his change, as cleansed, he and his entire troop return to the prophet's house and he says: 2 Ki. 5: 15: "Now I know that there is no God in all the world except in Israel ..."

Pride is an awful thing. It separates us from friends and colleagues, and worse, it separates us from God. Perhaps that is why Jesus said that blessed are the meek. Those who are poor, those who are the outcastes of our community are those who have no pride, they have nothing to be proud about! Those who can take pride in their achievements and their wealth and position are those in danger of *becoming* proud. I know that when I am complemented on something I have achieved, it is hard to accept the complement without feeling the temptation to be proud of that achievement. When people say, you must be proud of x. How do we respond? There is that old expression: pride comes before a fall.

Our very pride in the good things we have done may lead to separation from God. We need to keep coming back to check ourselves and our behaviour.

But there was not just the OT reading this morning, there was also the reading from Galatians. There was one verse that really stood out for me in that reading: "Carry one another's burdens and so fulfil the law of

Christ.” I well remember that verse I learnt many years ago in GFS. I am not sure that I really understood it then, but the verse stuck! The rider to this is: If anyone thinks he is something when he is nothing, he deceives himself. This follows so well from the story of Naaman. In one sense Naaman was something, but, his pride prevented him from letting go and receiving the free gift from God.

If we are not able to let go of our pride, even in small things, that will continue to separate us from God too. If we hold our pride, then we will not be able to reach out to others and bear each other’s burdens. Of course, again, this is something that doesn’t go down too well in our society, where we are all supposed to be autonomous individuals, and therefore *proud* of our ability to remain *proud* and independent. This also makes it hard for each of us, not only to help others, but to *accept* help when perhaps we need it. Maybe we can’t drive ourselves anymore, but don’t want to impose on others. It’s a two way thing.

The last word then is from the gospel. Luke, today. The sending out of the 70, the first missionaries. They are equipped for the journey. They came back praising God full of the joy of what they had achieved, but Jesus says to them: don’t rejoice in your own power, rather rejoice that your names have are written in heaven.

Lord help us to see the danger signs along the way, when we are tempted to become proud, help us, like Paul to boast only in you our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ!

Amen