

Trinity 17 sermon by Andrew 13 Oct 2019 A Journey to new life

2 Kings 5: 1-3, 7-15c; 2 Tim 2: 8-15; Luke 17: 11-19

Naaman's healing is one of the great stories of the Bible, and one of the most human. Because this man has a personality, he's a high achiever, loaded with honours by the king, a great warrior. So he's used to having to battle for what he wants. He knows that victories don't come easily in anything. But he's driven to desperation by this terrible affliction of leprosy, so he makes this journey, prompted by his Israelite slave girl, towards an encounter that's going to change everything.

And isn't it interesting that it's the slave girl, the captive, the powerless female who has the faith? Here's a minor actor in this drama you could just overlook, and yet she's another of those amazing women of Israel, full of faith. Like Mary of Nazareth she has no doubt what God can do and neither does this girl. And this is what gives her the courage to urge this course of action for Naaman.

And you can just imagine how Naaman might get ready for this journey, in his own way, on his own terms. It would appear he took his army with him. This is not popping round the corner to your GP's surgery. This is crossing borders into enemy territory and throwing yourself on the mercy of an enemy king whom you've previously defeated in battle (and you can just imagine Naaman, standing before the King of Israel and saying: You won't hold a little thing like a small war against me, will you?) But in fact such is Naaman's stature you don't get any sense that he's afraid at all. He's treating this journey towards a hoped for healing like it was another military campaign.

So after a setback in the palace, where it doesn't go well and the king throws a major hissy fit (he really doesn't come across well at all this king), good military man that he is, Naaman goes for the plan B opened up by Elisha's invitation. So with jingling harness and a great cloud of dust Naaman's army pulls up at Elisha's front door. But Elisha doesn't even come out. So now it's time for Naaman, who's really had enough by now, to have a hissy fit of his own. He's on a fool's errand at the prompting of a slave, he's just been thrown out by a king who's not half the man he is, and now he's standing twiddling his thumbs waiting on this wizard prophet to do some spectacular magic – which is the only thing he thinks could possibly work.

So, understandably, he's just about to stomp back to his chariot and say: "Home, James, and don't spare the horses", when again, enter the servants. The ones who may not call the shots in this world, but who seem to get the wisdom. And they really seem to know, and love, their master, and they say: Look, if he'd asked you to do some superhero task – you'd have done it. Again it's the quieter voices in this story, the slave girl, the servants, who seem to have that faith which is strong enough not just for them, but strong enough to hold a strong man to a course he's never had to contemplate in his life before.

And maybe we have this story to make us think: just how often have I been held in other people's faith, when my own wasn't equal to what was happening to me, or those times when I want to stomp off and leave God out of my life. And I guess that's why we're here together, so that in our Naaman moments we can be faithful servants for each other, we can hold each other to the journey, we can encourage each other to keep going

whatever's happening for us. So Naaman cools off, he listens, he submits – and how hard that must have been for him - and he goes down under the waters – the very same waters from which Jesus will one day emerge in his baptism as Son of God.

So this morning you get Naaman playing out our fears and struggles, trying to get over himself and his sense of who he thinks he is and how things are meant to work out – which results in a journey in which God will show him a new way to be who he thinks he is; and in the Gospel we get those ten lepers who also obey an instruction to go on a journey – go and show yourselves – before any change has actually happened. They're healed on the way.

The profound truth for us is that this longing for healing is a journey on which God accompanies us in Jesus, whatever's happening to us. One of the great religious works of art in Germany is the Eisenheim altarpiece by Grunewald. It's a huge painting, a panel, and it stood in the leper hospice, right where the suffering people lying in their beds, could see it. On one side it showed the crucified Christ with his tortured flesh – an image which enabled the lepers to say: My Jesus has been there, he's known the physical decay I'm living with. But on the other side it showed a resurrected Christ, glorious, transcendent, radiant – just like Naaman, flesh renewed like a young boy – which told them that in God that was how they would be eternally, so death and corruption don't have the last word.

You have to be crazy to be a Christian. Because we look at the reality of suffering full-on, without turning away; we look at the world just as it is and we say: Yes, but there's another reality too and another kingdom. And the understanding of it is given to slaves, servants, exiles, tax collectors, prostitutes and thieves, lepers and the unclean, and a certain carpenter who invites us to go on a journey. And whatever your river Jordan is, wherever he asks us to go, whatever he asks us to do, we know he's inviting us to be made new. Amen.