

St. Peter's. Trinity 3. 7.7.19 2 Kings 5:1-15

Allow me relate a cautionary tale I heard recently. There was a person who thought it would be clever to open the Bible at random and do whatever it said. So he opened the good book and read: *And Judas went and hanged himself.* As that didn't sound very promising, he thought he'd try again and alighted on the parable of the Good Samaritan where he read: *And go and do thou likewise.* Third time lucky he thought and read Jesus' instruction to Judas, *Do quickly what you have to do.* At which point he gave up.

And now for the healing of Naaman's leprosy where we read: *"Then he returned to the man of God, and he came and stood before him; and he said, "Behold, I know there is no God in all the earth but in Israel"."* Naaman was a great general, the best in the Syrian army. He had the ear of the king and the king depended upon him and his soldiers. He had his choice of Ferraris

and BMWs, secretaries and colourful uniforms. But there was just one problem – Naaman was a mighty man of valour – **but** he was a leper.

However well qualified **we** may be, however academically gifted, whatever our sporting achievements, so often there is a 'but' in our lives. What is your 'but'? what is my 'but'? Naaman was a great man with his master and in high favour ... he was a mighty man of valour, *but he was a leper.*

Back in Naaman's house there are trophies of war and some of them are human trophies – prisoners of war, refugees, boat people, we might say – the flotsam and jetsam of international conflict. One of them is a slave girl and she knows his secret.

Consider this slave girl, she is a quadruple nobody. She is a child; she is female; she is an Israelite; she is a slave. She is nothing.

Ancient society knew no cure for leprosy. The Bible presents it as a metaphor for guilt, sin, and death. Leprosy is a metaphor for all that is diseased and wrong in human life, for all that is hopeless, for all that is shameful, for all that we seek to keep hidden, even from

ourselves, lest the miserable truth be known. On account of it, in Naaman's resplendent house in Damascus there is a faintly sickening odour drifting through the perfumed corridors. Nevertheless, in this very house there is a slave girl who speaks a word of hope from another world. We might imagine her in her poorly fitting clothes, her tear-stained face – stolen from her parents and native land, brought from Israel to wait on the general's wife. Yet it is she who said to her mistress: *Would that my lord were with the prophet who is in Israel! He would cure him of his leprosy.*"

We do not hear of her again but the general drives over to the king's palace and tells him that there is prophet in Israel who can do the undoable.

Now here's a nice touch. The king wants his general cured, so he does what kings always do – he writes to the king of Israel. He doesn't write to the prophet. Kings always write to kings, CEOs to CEOs, Prime Ministers to Prime Ministers etc. If the PM wants to know about the human rights situation in Saudi Arabia he or she speaks to the crown prince not the women activists imprisoned for challenging human rights abuses.

So Naaman sets off with the king's letter and his vast entourage, presents and bribes. The king of Israel is momentarily flattered that his powerful neighbour has come to call on him but then he reads the letter: "*when this letter reaches you, know that I have sent to you Naaman my servant, that you may cure him of his leprosy.*" Imagine the reaction of the king of Israel. His enemy, the king of Syria, is poised on his borders day and night, ready to attack him at any moment and here is his general standing before him with a letter demanding the impossible!

The king of Israel looked up from the letter and said: "*Am I God? To kill and to make alive, that this man sends word to me to cure a man of his leprosy?*"

With this masterstroke the biblical narrator sets the real theological question before us. "Am I God to kill or to make alive?" Only God has ultimate power to heal or to destroy.

Off in his little house on the edge of town the prophet Elisha, "the man of God", goes off to buy a newspaper and sees the headline – "General Pays Call! King Rends Clothes!" He promptly sends the newspaper boy to the

palace with the message: *“Why have you rent your clothes? Let him (Naaman) come to me, that he may know there is a prophet in Israel.”*

The kings and generals of Syria may not have known a prophet from a snake charmer but the kings of Israel certainly did. Elisha’s predecessor was the great Elijah who had slaughtered 400 prophets of Baal. The prophets of Israel were men who stood before God and heard the deliberations of the heavenly councils. So Elisha is not saying, *“Let Naaman come down here and see what a powerful person I am”* but *“Let Naaman come and know the power and freedom of the God of Israel.”*

So Naaman comes with all his chariots, money, men and gifts and *“halts at the door of Elisha’s house. He does not even dismount but waits haughtily for the prophet to come out to him – his social inferior. But Elisha does not come out, he doesn’t even answer the door bell. Instead he sends a servant with a brief message, “Go and wash in the Jordan seven times and your flesh will be restored, and you shall be clean.”*

Naaman is furious. He has not come all this way to a little back-water of a town to be told to wash in a dirty

brown wadi when he could have stayed at home and dipped in the waters of the mighty rivers of Damascus. Naaman had come looking for a top-level consultation with a charismatic healer. Who does the prophet of Israel think he is? Who does the God of Israel think he is? So Naaman *“turned and went away in a rage”* – and Elisha lets him go.

Again the story turns on the voice of a nobody. A servant hesitantly approaches his master and suggests that had the prophet told him to build a hospital suit in his house or go to Nepal to visit a guru he would have done it, so why not try this little thing he suggested – there’s no harm in trying. Notice the simplicity and theological inadequacy of this argument. We do not expect God to act in this way. Naaman certainly did not. He thought Elisha would come out to him and make elaborate gestures and utter eloquent words and treat him in a way befitting to his station in life. But somehow Naaman saw sense in the hesitant speech of his servants, pulled up his horse and went back.

“So he went back and dipped himself seven times in the Jordan, according to the word of the man of God; and

his flesh was restored like the flesh of a little child, and he was clean."

The God who can kill and make alive has given life. And behold! Naaman goes all the way back to the house of the prophet and this time gets off his horse and confesses: *"Now I know there is no God in all the earth except in Israel."*

Now, think of Naaman, for a moment, from the standpoint of the Hebrew people. Naaman was a Syrian – as man of another race, another culture, not one of the chosen people. He was a pagan, an unbeliever, he was the leader of the forces of Israel's enemies – he was a Vladimir Putin, a President of the EU, a leader of the Chinese communist party.

This is offensive. Lest we doubt it Luke tells us that Jesus of Nazareth, when he first appears in the synagogue of his home town said these words: *"There were many people in Israel who had leprosy in the time of Elisha the prophet, but not one of them was cleansed – only Naaman the Syrian."* His hearers were so enraged that they tried to throw him off a cliff. We do not want to believe that God shows preferential treatment to the

foreigners, the pagans, the enemy. We'd rather not know that God is an internationalist, is kind to the member of every nation and really wants us to get along with our neighbours.

Is there a little slave girl somewhere in your life, someone who will speak a word of hope to your leprosy, to the 'but' in your life? It may be someone you are jealous of or threatened by, or very scornful of. And the message when you hear it will invariably be simple, unexpected and inappropriate. Because God shows his love not by overwhelming us with demonstrations of power and majesty but rather by coming alongside us with water, and bread, and wine, and the invitation:

Wash and be clean;

Follow me and be healed;

Take and eat this, and be fed with the bread of heaven;
drink this, and you will never be thirsty again.