

‘I choose to make you clean.’

Vicar Joyce

Readings: *2 Kings 5: 1-14. I Corinthians 9: 24-27, Mark 1: 40-45.*

Some people in Syria today ask – ‘Does the world care?’ We see and hear of unrest and destruction in the cities, the whole country moving further towards civil war in that nation with a long history of dissent. It is challenging that Naaman, the key actor in today’s drama from our Hebrew Scripture reading, came from Syria, a nation that was always powerful and a constant thorn in Israel’s side.

The area north and east of Israel known as Aram, is today part of Syria. The Aramean army would skirmish into Israel plundering goods and people. Naaman was Commander of the Army and his wife had a little girl captured from her home in Israel to be her servant. God's favour was upon Naaman. He had considerable standing as chief of the armed forces, was also fair, generous and pleasant, *but* he was a leper.

Leprosy in biblical times was not the leprosy of today, Hansen’s disease. Rather, the people who had skin troubles such as psoriasis and eczema, even ringworm - 70 or more conditions, nearly all non-contagious – were treated as leprosy. There was a morbid fear of infection for the community. If anyone developed a skin disorder they would be put in quarantine for 7 days, and then examined by the priest. If the condition persisted then they would be ostracised from the community. Many could expect to heal and in Israel there was a ritual and a sacrifice to make to prove one was healed. Having the disease though, meant isolation, living in caves, begging for food, being out of the village, out of the family, until the disease was over. The outcasts had to stay distant from others, cover their mouths and call out ‘Unclean!, Unclean!’ Fellow travellers would avoid looking at them, diverting to miss them, adding to the isolating sense of loneliness and community judgement as all disease was assumed to have been inflicted by God due to the sufferer’s sin or that of a family member – even a deceased one.

Naaman was not bound by Israel’s rules, but his own society would have ones very similar. I have always wondered how he could travel into Israel - perhaps he was too powerful to stop. Israel’s security may have depended on making an exception for a man as powerful as Naaman. Every day we make choices to respond to each other’s infirmities in ways that can bring hurt or healing.

The little unnamed girl had grown to care for her new family. She had faith in God and in the confidence of her child-like trust she told Naaman’s wife about the prophet Elisha and Yahweh, her God. She chose the path of healing for a man who was responsible for her capture and possibly the death of her family. We have heard the story of Naaman going with his King’s blessing to the King of Israel with a huge treasure chest and a request for healing. The king is very angry, frustrated and fearful. ‘Am I God!?’ – he exclaims – ‘No! This is just an excuse for another military raid on Israel.’ Elisha, however, is not bothered by Naaman’s presence. He sees an opportunity for God’s grace to be revealed, so he comes to the King’s rescue and gives Naaman the simplest of tasks:

‘Go - wash 7 times - the biblical number of completion - in the river Jordan.’

The brave little girl had recognised God at work in Elisha but the king of Israel had not done so. Naaman was furious at Elisha’s request. He sought a public and dramatic expression of God’s power. He expected the prophet of God the Most High to come out and show him the proper respect due to a mighty military commander. He did not want to be instructed by a house servant to do something as humiliating as washing in the despised Jordan. However, it says a lot about both his character and his desperation that the commander was able to be talked out of his anger at not having been received as importantly as he wished and he finally did the simple activity. The consequences were profound. Naaman returned to Elisha, and now cleansed, engaged directly with him. He became a worshipper of Yahweh. His arrogance had been washed away.

It is remarkable that Naaman, an agent of persecution for the people of Israel, is nevertheless a recipient of God’s healing and restoration to wholeness. Don’t you wonder how the little slave-girl felt when her master came home not just healed but whole? She could so easily have abandoned her faith when she was snatched in a kidnapping raid and sold off in a foreign country, yet she chose to remain faithful to God and saw her trust so richly rewarded.

Most of us have had experiences where we felt abandoned and cut off – quite often some terrible experience is the reason people give us for giving up their faith. Yet here God shows us that whatever happens we are never abandoned and even in adversity God remains with us always.

I wonder how you feel when a simple act is all that is needed to bring healing to a person or a situation. Little acts of humble grace are powerful messages of Gospel truth. I admire the simple faith of the little girl. She was without her family, dependant on a new family who may have destroyed her own, yet she had compassion on them in their situation of desperate need.

Awful experiences need not lead us to bitterness or a desire for revenge. Here is a shining example of God's grace shown by a child who determined that her faith would stay strong and be shared with a man in need. Can you imagine how he greeted her upon his return?

Returning to Jesus – how did he care for lepers and others cut off by a community fearful of contagion? If you touched a leper in Jesus' time you also would be considered unclean. The leper he met early in his ministry was determined to seek Jesus initially in a humble way, kneeling before him. He recognised the power Jesus had. Jesus had compassion for those in this appalling situation, coupled with anger about the whole unjust isolation imposed upon them - perhaps also at the power of the priestS in deciding who was clean. Both Jesus and the leper valued the spiritual and social status physical health conferred.

Jesus touched the man. His touch brought wholeness and holiness to the leper, not uncleanness to himself. Here is a society where ritual uncleanness was very prominent through the assumption that purity was contaminated by touching or even being close to that which was ritually unclean. Jesus chose to model the opposite – that spiritual cleanliness was a gift imparted to those who were considered unclean, thus making them whole without contaminating the giver.

Hurt or heal. The man was urged very strongly not to tell everyone about his healing – after all it would soon be obvious - but simply to go to the priest and begin the eight day process provided to re-enter society. The healed man disobeyed, thus hindering Jesus' ministry. He preached the good news about Jesus' healing power. He didn't hear or accept that the heart of Jesus' message was not about physical healing, but inner transformation. The consequent fame of his witness hampered the ministry of Jesus as huge numbers clamoured for physical healing more than spiritual cleansing.

The leper had been living outside the camp and was now restored to the community. Jesus had been freely moving in the villages. Now he was forced to live in the country, isolated from the community. While people continued to seek him, many did so for superficial reasons, not for a healing of their souls. Hurt or heal. God bless us to be healers who bring wholeness to others.