

Sunday 9 October 2022

St. Margaret's & Holy Trinity – Holy Communion - Trinity 17

2 Kings 5:1-3 & 7-15c

2 Timothy 2:8-15

Luke 17:11-19

I love the story of Naaman, it's got everything.

For a start, the hero is such a thoroughly likeable character.

Naaman gets on well with his wife, he gets on well with his slaves and he gets on well with his king - all of which suggests an unusual gift for friendship.

But, despite all this, he clearly has some ordinary human failings.

He's just a bit too aware of his position in life and insists on being treated with the appropriate amount of respect.

Next, there's a really amusing element to the story. Take the King of Israel's response to the request to heal Naaman - this could easily have come straight out of a pantomime or a Brian Rix farce.

Finally, the author has a special skill for painting a picture. There's the intimate scene between Naaman's wife and the slave girl; there are two completely contrasting royal courts, with a big king and a little king, and then there's the blockbuster bit where Naaman turns up outside Elisha's house with his horses and chariots, his gold and his silver, his slaves and all his finery.

And what happens? Elisha doesn't even bother to come out to greet him.

It feels like Elisha deliberately means to humiliate Naaman. Elisha could have done pretty much what Naaman was expecting... incantations, incense and a whole load of ritual. At the very least, he could have come out and touched Naaman's leprous hand. Instead, he sends his servant out to tell Naaman to take a running jump into the river; and not any old river at that, this was the muddy, filthy River Jordan.

It's this, I believe, that makes Naaman's final response so moving. When his loving servants at last persuade Naaman to do as he is told, and he realises that he is cured, he returns humbly and gratefully to the man of God. There's no sign of any lingering resentment at the way he was treated. He completely accepts the initial rebuke... 'Now I know', he says, 'that there is no God in all the earth except in Israel'.

This response from Naaman is what makes this the perfect match for our Gospel reading this morning. Naaman and the one leper who returned to say thank you make a good pair.

However, there's not quite the same parity with Elisha and Jesus because Jesus is much more gracious about the whole thing than Elisha was. Elisha refuses to

accept anything from Naaman and does nothing that would allow Naaman to restore his wounded dignity.

On the other hand, Jesus says to the leper.. 'your faith has made you well'. In that one short phrase, Jesus has given back to the man power over his own life, treated him as an equal, and fully restored him to normal society. An unbelievable gift to someone who was used to being totally shunned, hanging out only with other lepers and relying on charity for all his needs.

But, of course, there's a sting in the tail of this story in Luke's Gospel account, because this leper who comes back to thank Jesus is not an Israelite but a foreigner - and worse than that, he's a Samaritan to boot.

This passage is part of a series of stories around Jesus' conflicts with the Pharisees and we are naturally gratified to hear of Jesus listening to the poor and the disadvantaged and him healing them.

But there's a dark undertone here; a sombre note which shows people's rejection of Jesus and all that he wants to do for them. All the four Gospel accounts agree that, although many people either feared or just misunderstood Jesus, it was the religious leaders who had turned this fear and misunderstanding into something of an art form.

The very people who had all the clues to solve the mystery of who Jesus was were those who were most baffled. I wonder if perhaps the problem was that they didn't even think there was a mystery; perhaps they thought they had the solution already. Maybe they thought they themselves were the solution?

This is where we need to be careful.

The temptation to believe that we have got God tamed and all worked out didn't die with the Pharisees. It is very much alive and kicking today.

Jesus has the knack of comforting the disturbed and disturbing the comfortable.

Before Naaman was able to experience God's healing comfort, his overblown head and pride had to be punctured, reduced to dipping in the humble River Jordan without even getting an audience with God's prophet.

Is pride stopping us from submitting to God's will and transformation in our own lives, and in the life of our church?

What riches would Naaman have missed out on had he not taken his servants' advice to obey God's word through the prophet Elisha?

And goodness me, what blessings will we miss out on if we avoid God's word and will, all because of our own pride and independence?

Amen.