

1/7 Holy Communion (AT) 12th February 2012

This reading from 2 Kings picks up the same theme of Leprosy and God's power to heal.

In a sense, we see here in the Old Testament a hint of God's nature - a God who heals - which is then fulfilled in Jesus' ministry in the New testament.

But there are some more subtle points to be drawn out of this ancient story.

In Mark, we see Jesus healing, mainly as a reaching out to people in need.

In Mark 2. 41, we read that as Jesus reached out his hand to touch the man he was "filled with compassion".

And when the man was cured, Jesus sent him away and said "See that you don't tell this to anyone."

So there is a sense in which Jesus is saying if God has blessed you in some way, it is not something to brag about.

God acted that day, in Jesus' ministry, to do something good, and kind, and generous, to a person who knew little love, or generosity, and whose life was probably, up to that point, miserable.

The leper's tale

Second Sunday
before Lent

Mark 1. 40 - 45
2 Kings 5. 1 - 14

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So there was glory being given to God.

It would show in that man's changed life,
his changed circumstances.

But we see, then as now,
when something of God's glory is revealed,
there are those who welcome it,
and turn afresh to God.

There are those who find it most unwelcome.
Those who do not want any hint of faith,
or expression of worship,
even to hear the prayers of others.
They do not want this thrust upon them.

So as from Friday,
it has now been declared illegal in this country,
to include opening prayers on a Council agenda.

And so in Jesus' time
the challenge of seeing God's power at work,
for some was a turn off, not a turn on,
and Jesus could not enter a town openly.

*He stayed outside in lonely places,
and people came to him.
From everywhere.*

But the situation in 2 Kings was very different.

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Naaman, is an army commander,
in a neighbouring country, Aram.
And he has this awful affliction - described as leprosy.
He is clearly not considered outcast, in his society,
but whatever it is that he has,
it is very unpleasant.

In his service, a servant of his wife,
is a captured Israelite girl.

She is not timid about proclaiming how good God is.

Back home, we have a prophet;
God does powerful things through him.
If Naaman went to see him,
he would be cured!

Naaman wants this, and asks his master, the King,
if he may go to Israel, and be cured.
The King of Aram says yes,
and writes to the King of Israel, saying,
"Cure my officer Naaman, of leprosy".

Sadly, the faith of the king of Israel is so weak,
he gets really upset about his,,
he thinks it is a trick.
When Naaman is not cured,
the king of Aram will pick a fight with him,
and go to war. And Israel will lose!

Elisha hears about this, and is angry.
He is God's prophet, and he knows what God can do.

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Send him to me, says Elisha.
And he will know there is a prophet in Israel!

A prophet is a servant of God.
Elisha is not boasting about his own powers.
He is boasting about God.

If we fast-forward the story to the end,
to verse 15, just beyond our reading this morning,
we see the outcome!

Naaman says,

*Now I know that there is no God in all the world
except in Israel.*

There are lessons to be learnt
about how Elisha went about Naaman's healing.

He had to dip himself in the river Jordan,
a rather small, dirty river.

He wanted to bathe in one of the rivers of Damascus,
the Arbanah and the Pharpar.

There are some names to remember for trivia quizzes!

Much grander rivers. More like the Thames, or the Rhine.
And Elisha says, - no - go the Witham.

Because it is the God of Israel,
who is God of all the Earth.

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Damascus, and the king of Aram,
may be much superior to Israel and the king of Samaria,

but Israel's God, is second to none.

There are things about humility,
this great and respected soldier
the Commander of the victorious Damascus Army,
has to bow down before the God of Israel,
before God will bless him.

There are some more bits to the story,
where Naaman is so impressed with this God
that in order to continue to worship him when he gets home,
he takes a lorry-load of Israeli top-soil home with him
to put in his back garden
so he can worship God on Israeli soil.
Again, mistakenly believing
that this God is the God of Israel,
when in fact, he is God of all the earth,
There is no other God!

That's what I like about these stories from 1 and 2 Kings.
Elijah and Elisha.

They were in a world, where Israel were the poor neighbours.
Surrounded by nations more powerful commercially
stronger militarily, superior culturally,
but when it came to matters of faith,
command over the weather, over disease,
even in battle against stronger foes,
God always wins! Not Israel, but God.

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So what has this to do with us?

Jesus maintained his ministry.
even when unpopular.
He did the right thing,
the compassionate thing,
the godly thing.
Always.

Even though sometimes he had to do it quietly.

Elisha, was not in good standing with his king.
The King had forgotten he existed.
And the state of Israel had gone quite secular.

But Elisha continued his ministry.
Sometimes spectacular
sometimes quiet.

But he never gave in
to the official secularisation programme.

He never compromised his faith.

He got on with his work and his ministry.
And God found ways to bring him to where he was needed.

For us - in the battle
to demonstrate that a relationship with God
and faithfulness to God's ways
are part of normal everyday life -
and should be part of our national life -
we have lost ground this week.

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But we must not lose heart.

Even Jesus became socially not acceptable.

And he was treated in many ways like a leper.
Outcast, not loved, or valued, or accepted.

And that may be the path we have to walk sometimes.

But do not lose heart.

In the real world, God's world,
God is always on top.
Even when his people cannot see it.

We must stand firm, simply because
the godly thing, the compassionate thing,
is always the right thing.

And that is our call.

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Setting the Scene

The story moves on.

Last week - after church -

Jesus went to Simon's for lunch.

He had a very busy day, healing and driving out demons.

The next day, he found a quiet place to pray

and then moved on to new places

to preach, and heal, and drive out more demons.

Now we have the story of one man

who Jesus stopped to help.

What was wrong with him?

He had leprosy - a dreaded skin disease.

So he was ill - but also - he was an outcast.

Are there things like that today?

People with something wrong with them -

so people keep out of their way?

Mental illness and depression?

The homeless in the street - like Nomad Trust?

Drug addicts and drunks.

There are lots of lonely people for lots of reasons.

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In Jesus' time, what did you do when a leper approached?
You got out of the way.

What did Jesus do?
He reached out and touched him!

What do you think the crowd would have done?

They would have backed away from Jesus!
Because Jesus was now "unclean".

There is something very important going on here.

For Jesus to help a person with a problem
Jesus took onto himself that problem.

So we start with one unclean person.
Jesus touches him.
We have two unclean people! NO!
We have two well people. The man is healed.

Another example.
I have a problem. You have a problem.
The problem of sin.
We have done things wrong, and it separates us from God.

What does Jesus do?
He comes close to us. He takes on our sin.
Does he become sinful? NO! We become righteous.

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Another example.

I am going to die. You are going to die.

Jesus is in heaven and lives for ever.

What does he do?

He comes to earth and takes on our humanity.

He dies for us.

The result? One more dead person?

No - Jesus is raised from the dead

and we also inherit the right to eternal life.

This is the miracle of being Jesus.

But can we do anything like the same?

If we see someone

who does not belong to normal society.

Lonely, different, outcast.

Perhaps it is someone who is outside

God's friendship circle.

Because of their lifestyle? their circumstances?

What I mean is -

they do not know that they are loved by God.

Do we expect them to change, to become like us,

to be able to join?

Or have we got to go to them

share in their misfortune, their loneliness

but take our love to them,

take our acceptance to them?

To go and be where they are for a while.

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But somehow, because we are God's children,
we do not get dragged down by them -
they should be lifted by us!

But it begins by us going to them
not the other way round.

It needs thinking about.

It is not just something to do.

It is a pattern of behaviour. Of lifestyle.

To do with generosity, sacrifice, becoming vulnerable.

And also to think about ...

When Jesus behaved like this
people backed off.

*"He could no longer enter a town openly
but stayed outside in lonely places."*

A lot to think about.

More later //

Birthdays and presentations

Testimony time, Collection