

Sermon for Holy Trinity Geneva on Sunday 12 October 2025, 17th Sunday after Trinity – am

Texts: 2 Kings 5.1-3, 7-15C; 2 Timothy 2.8-15; Luke.17.11-19

Size isn't everything

In our world dominated by power politics today, it is understandable to think that being the biggest the most important if you want to have an impact. But size isn't always everything. The Dalai Lama once famously quoted, "If you think you are too small to make a difference, you haven't spent the night with a mosquito".

There is a strong element of this truth in the story of Naaman and the slave girl which we've heard today. The context in which this incident takes place was a time of tension and intermittent conflict between Syria where Naaman was a senior military leader and Israel where Elisha was a prophet. It was during one of the conflicts that the little slave girl who now served his wife, was brought as part of the booty of war from Israel to Syria. Naaman was suffering from a severe skin ailment which may or may not have been leprosy, However, it was sufficiently serious to cause him problems and probably meant that people tried to keep their distance from him.

What happens next is a remarkable and touching story of an act of kindness which was to have totally unseen effects. Moved by Naaman's ailment and then differing it was no doubt causing him, the girl tells her mistress about the prophet Elisha in her own country whom, she is convinced can bring him relief. Events then move fast – no doubt her mistress then spoke to Naaman who was persuaded; he in turn spoke to the king and before we know it, sent quantities of silver, gold and precious cloth to the King of Israel beseeching him to cure Naaman. We're told the king tore his clothes as he read the letter- convinced that this impossible demand was some kind of new declaration of war. But when the prophet Elisha hears of it, he recognises God's hand at work and tells the king to send Naaman to him, "So that he may recognise that there is a prophet in Israel".

We've heard this morning what happened then and the healing of Naaman, albeit not without incident first. For Naaman is enraged by the refusal of Elisha to come out and greet him and the prophet's cursory message for him to bathe in the River Jordan. It is only the intervention of his servants which finally persuade Naaman to do as the prophet has instructed and to go and bathe seven times in the Jordan.

What are the key points of this story for us? I think there are a number.

The first is the importance of the witness of those who we may not consider very important or relevant in our daily lives. The little slave girl who is seized from Israel in the course of war and ends up serving in Naaman's household, must have been pretty well at the bottom of the pecking order there. Perhaps there was no one else from her own country there, and she would have had no power or anyone to speak up for her. Yet through her words, she sets something far bigger in motion as we are to see.

Next, let's just reflect for a moment on her kindness. It would not have been at all surprising, given what the girl had suffered at the hands of the invading army, to

loathe Naaman and his family with a vengeance and to think he thoroughly deserved the unpleasant skin complaint he suffered. But on the contrary, her heart goes out to him and she thinks how his suffering can be relieved and by whom. It's worth thinking of those times we have received kindness and thoughtfulness from those whom perhaps we have not treated particularly well or even noticed at all who, nevertheless, have put themselves out to help us and work for our well-being and may well, in the process, have profoundly changed our lives.

It is also important to see what the slave girl sets in motion. For not only is Naaman healed after he finally follows the instructions of Elisha, but he recognises the action of the God of Israel in this. Despite his initial anger against Elisha, he comes back, we are told with his entire retinue and declares before him, "*Right, I recognise there is no God in all the earth except in Israel*". Having offered Elisha a gift to express his gratitude, which the prophet refuses, Naaman then asks Elisha if he will let him have two mules' worth of the soil of Israel which he plans to take back to Syria so that he may continue to worship Yahweh in his own country. Naaman has come to faith in God – to a living relationship with Yahweh, all of which has been set in motion by the words of his servant girl. What is more, he is going to take steps, and risky steps at that, to go on worshipping Yahweh, even whilst carrying out his role of supporting his king and in the context of alien gods.

In a world in which we often feel extremely powerlessness to have any impact or influence on what is happening around us, this story has a message for us that a small message or act of kindness can have an impact greater than we can imagine. You may remember that St James in his epistle in the Bible, warns of the capacity which we have as human beings, to cause hurt and damage to others through unkind or malicious words we say which are then fanned, often out of all proportion, through gossip and unthinking prejudice. He compares it to a forest fire, which starts through a spark falling to the ground, but then rapidly spreads from bush to bush, tree to tree, setting the whole forest ablaze and becoming almost impossible to control. He didn't know about trolling but I think St James would have recognised the truth of his words in the vicious and often cruel outcomes of some of our social media exchanges today.

But whilst this is undoubtedly true, or perhaps precisely because this is true, it's really important as Christians that we remind ourselves and witness to the other side of this coin. The other side of the coin is the truth that each of us one of has the capacity through small acts of kindness and thoughtfulness, to break down areas of prejudice and fear and to build new and lasting relationships. This is particularly true when we are reaching out to those who may be very different from us, perhaps in ethnicity, religion, or lifestyle and experience and with whom we may have little or no contact in the past or indeed, difficult and tense relationships. In Geneva, we have unique opportunities to do just this because of the rich diversity of the different communities living and working together here and reflected in our church community.

It's important for us too today to reflect on the significance which Jesus placed on this story of Naaman. For Jesus actually cited it in his inaugural sermon at the synagogue in Nazareth when he pointed out that although there were many lepers at

the time of Elisha, none of them were healed except Naaman the Syrian. In other words, it was the foreigner, the outsider, rather than those who were supposed to be his chosen people, who had heard and responded to the call of God. It was this comment that provoked the anger of those listening.

And in our Gospel today, we see reflected again. For of the ten lepers who call out to healing and who are sent by Jesus to show themselves to the priest, only one, when he discovers that he is indeed healed, turns back, praises God and then thanks Jesus profoundly. He was a Samaritan – one hated and despised as an outsider. What was going through the minds of the other nine lepers we can only speculate – doubt perhaps as to whether they were actually cured, perhaps excitement which drove everything else from their minds; fear to be seen identifying with someone who, though they knew had healed them, already had a price on his head. Whatever the reason – they do not come back, praise God or thank Jesus.

Both the stories of Naaman and that of the ten lepers remind us of the importance of humility and thankfulness. Although neither quality is particularly prized in our cutthroat worlds of work and politics today, they are core Christian virtues which can help us both to see the world in a very different way. For if we are humble, we are more likely to see the hand of God at work and if we are thankful, it helps us to be in a right relationship with God and with one another.

One aspect of humility is about learning to recognise and accept that God may well be making himself known to us through the one who we may see as an outsider, the stranger or the one of little consequence. It's about having the grace to see that they may well have noticed, learnt things and understood things of which we have no grasp. Remember it was the slave girl who introduces Naaman to Elisha; it is Naaman's servants who persuade their testy master, not march off home in a huff as a result of Elisha's words to him – by their actions, they save his life. It is the servants at the wedding at Cana who know where the new wine has come from, not the one who is technically in charge.

Both humility and thankfulness help us to learn to see the hand of God in our lives and the lives of others in things which may seem small and insignificant. For if we begin to think each day of those things, those encounters, those people for which we want to say thank you to God, we start to see more deeply, the significance of them. Thankful and humble reflection help us not only to recognise God in small, the apparently powerless, the outsider, but also to realise just how much we depend on and need one another, whatever our background may be.

And if you are tempted to ignore this, just remember the whine of the mosquito in your ear as you are trying to get to sleep. Remember size isn't always everything!

Amen

Canon Daphne Green