

Sermon – 31 January 2010
By Venerable Susanna Pain

Luke 4

Let us pray:

God, sometimes you take our breath away – not so much out of wonder but shock. We find you with ones we did not expect. You do what we would not have chosen. Move our lives to join you on the edge, where holy love stretches out with grace. Amen

Naaman was an officer in the Syrian army. Respected, admired, a success, rich arrogant and rude, but he had a problem, an illness, an incurable illness ‘leprosy’. A junior clerk, a new recruit, a foreigner encouraged him to see one of her prophets – she insisted. ‘Usually, I don’t listen to such crap’ he said, ‘but something in her voice her manner her integrity made me take notice – so in this conquered land, I visited her healer – he didn’t even give me an audience but sent me to bathe in their holy river.

What’s the matter with our rivers?

‘Do it’ she said, ‘what harm can it do?’

So I swallowed my pride, me a general, what’s come over me?

Seven times I went under.

Seven times in that Jordan River and I came out healed, a different man – more humble yet purified still – and I wanted to worship this God – me of all people. I became a proselyte - a believer – a Jewish convert.

Outsider though I am – she cared enough to show me the way - That, I find hard to believe. Though I am grateful

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Jesus came home.

He’d been hanging around with foreigners and outcasts. You know those people in Capernaum – a Roman garrison town – not a good place, but he came and we were proud of our boy. He looked good, if a little thin drawn - that long retreat he’d been on, in the desert. He could do with some feeding up. But he scrubbed up okay for Sabbath prayers, and he read so beautifully ‘Isaiah’ – always my favourite – ‘good news to the poor... let the captives go free’ (poetry to my ears)

Reasonably familiar. Then he sat down. ‘Today this has been fulfilled in your hearing’ he said. We were smiling – confident in our place in the scheme of things – knowing what we had to do ...

But then we went on – you could feel the mood change My body tensed. This is not what we’re used to – ‘No doubt you’ll say ‘Physician, heal yourself’ he said, ‘Do the magic you did in Capernaum’ He said. Then if you don’t mind, he quoted to us our scripture – but with bite. Remember Elijah, he said, the famine? Elijah didn’t help them at home. He went to Lebanon that cursed place) and helped a widow there ...

Why is he saying this?

And Elisha and that dreadful Syrian general ... Naaman

What’s he implying? We know these stories
But there’s an edge to it.

Who does he think he is, this Joseph's son?

???Who id he to speak to us like that?

I feel way outside my comfort zone – he's siding with the Foreigners and the prophets. This is too much. I can't stand this. 'Get rid of him!!!'

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I read this week '4 tips from a successful businessman'

(http://www.bible.claret.org/liturgy/daily/sundays_pierse/cycleC/C_4thSunOT.htm)

First you give the impression that you are rich, famous and successful. Dress the part – mobile phone, laptop. First impressions are important. People do judge a book by its cover – and by how you look.

Second, never start your campaign at home. Avoid family, neighbourhood and friends. They know you and your faults, and those of your family. If you have success they will get jealous and cut you down to size. So start with total strangers.

Third, don't upset people – tell them what they want to hear, do your research.

Lastly, do not put yourself on the line. Don't say you are going to do something. Just make promises, paint a bright picture of the future, distract them from the present. Better still give them a scapegoat – it's someone else's fault! Never tell them what they don't want to hear – like they should be responsible, sacrifice to others and limit their own lifestyle!

Go for it!

Jesus didn't have a chance did he?

He broke all the rules! To start with he'd just come from a long fast in the desert, looking like a starved animal. He spoke to his own people and told them the truth about themselves. He challenged them to change their ways and to become responsible for themselves ... So what did they do? They eventually took him out, killed him.

Naaman is lead by God to the simplest places for healing. God leads him into the River Jordan seven times. Seven times? Yes ... seven. Seven, it seems, is the recommended dose for a cure from leprosy (or so say the prescriptions in the fourteenth chapter of Leviticus). Just as the doctor requires that a patient take the complete course of antibiotics, so Naaman is required to bathe seven times in the healing river. To be washed with ordinary water.

Given the amount of water I like t use in Baptisms, it will come as no surprise that I sometimes wish that we had one of those full immersion baptismal tanks. Then we'd make the baptismal connection between the font and the Jordan River.

That's it, isn't it? The font does double as the Jordan River where Jesus was baptised, where Naaman was healed. And we have one right here; and some Sundays it appears in front where friend or foe; neighbour and stranger; old-timer and newcomer cannot worship God without seeing it.

Do you see? We have been performing the story of Naaman on all of these Sundays for all of these years without even knowing it and we'll be doing it again for Benjamin in a few weeks. In fact, Naaman is no stranger to us. How many here already know what it is to be a 'leper'; in their family; among their peers; at their work; even in the church?

How many of us have come here at one time or another because we had nowhere else to turn for our healing. Because we were responding to some small seemingly insignificant voice that said: "There is One in Samaria, near the Galilee who can heal you?" Who among us has come to this font of life not just once but seven times over, to be made clean and whole? How many Naaman's make up a congregation like this? How many who succeed on all of the world's terms and yet are not whole, not acceptable, not well?

To be honest, I am convinced that each one here is Naaman. There are those among us who already know the healing of the cleansing waters of the Jordan. And then there are those others here who long to know what it means to be healed. To know that they are accepted and acceptable to God and to others. Who long to belong and not to be passed by or forgotten or cast out?

And yet, make no mistake about this morning's text from Luke, there are also those Naaman's whom we think are beyond the grace of God. Those awful Naaman's who Jesus welcomes into the cleansing waters of the Jordan. People some consider unworthy of God's kindness and mercy. Our enemies, be they political, ethnic, personal, or even in our own families. People whom we might be enraged at learning of God's grace being given to them as well, unless of course we remember that God is God. And, in the end, it is not our choice but God's to call. It is the choice of Jesus Christ, the one who loved a world that rejected and betrayed him, who challenged his community with his 'inclusiveness', whose own nail marked hands, whose own death judged the world.

Differently from me. Thank God.