

Pentecost 18, Year C

2 Kings 5:1-15, 2 Timothy 2:8-15, Luke 17:11-19

“You’re being mean to me!” So, says 6 year old Emily when she is being reprimanded by her father. I suspect that even before she reaches teen age she will be using that phrase beloved of adolescents “You disrespect me.”

And today our readings are about disrespect and respect, ingratitude and gratitude but underlying it all, about salvation.

We shall explore those themes through our reading in 2 Kings; the curing of Naaman’s leprosy. Naaman was a foreigner to Israel, a Syrian. Aram is another name for Syria in the bible. He was, we read, a great man, the commander of the Syrian army. And he seemed to have been not only highly regarded by his boss but also well-liked and respected. We see this in the attitude of the slave girl, his servants, and the king of Syria. It was what he had come to expect. *Great man* was his station in life.

I suspect that at this point Naaman is unaware that he is great *because*, we read, *through him the LORD had given victory to Aram*. And it makes me wonder how often we fail to perceive that the LORD is actively involved in our lives even, perhaps, when we are not seeking it.

Anyway, when Naaman hears that there is a prophet in Israel who could cure his leprosy he has no hesitation in asking the king to allow him to go to see him, although it does appear that he is assuming that the prophet was a man of his own station in life, none other than the king of Israel himself!

So, when Naaman pitches up in Israel’s throne room with his letter expecting that the king will cure him the king is naturally horrified – only God can heal!

Now enter Elisha into the story who hears of the king’s problem and proposes the solution. Well, not actually “enter” because Elisha does nothing in person in this account until the last verse which becomes part of the problem.

Because when Naaman pitches up at Elisha’s front door with all the trappings of wealth and prestige, expecting the respect and deference he regards as his due, it fails to transpire. Elisha apparently can’t even be bothered to come to the door himself in honour of the great man; he disrespects him and sends a messenger instead.

And a messenger with a demeaning instruction. Naaman is to wash himself seven times in the dirty, murky waters of the Jordan in order to be cleansed. It makes no sense at all to wash in a dirty river in order to be clean! And seven times too! What’s that about? Naaman is not to know that seven times signifies completion and perfection.

So Naaman considers this command disrespectful.

He expects some grand gesture, some recognition of who he is. He expects Elisha to be present, to call on God, perform some rite and heal him instantly. How about that as an expression of faith?! But instead, a messenger is telling him to wash in a dirty river.

Naaman's pride nearly costs him his chance of healing. He wants Elisha to respect him in the way of Naaman's choosing but will not in turn respect Elisha by responding to him with obedience.

The ten lepers in our gospel reading could easily have been in the same position. After they ask for help Jesus tells them to go and show themselves to the priest. Fair enough.

This was a legal requirement for anyone with leprosy whose illness had been cured or had burnt itself out. The priest would ratify that this was so and the leper could then rejoin normal society rather than live as an outcast.

But when Jesus tells these lepers to go to the priest, they still have active leprosy. It is only as they actually turn and go that they are cleansed. It would not have happened if they had applied logic and waited stood there until healing happened before heading off to see the priest.

Incidentally neither Naaman nor the ten lepers would have been healed at all if they had not asked for help. Naaman is not too proud, and neither do the leper outcasts feel too unworthy to ask for God's help.

And I wonder if we have the same attitude, or do we perhaps feel too insignificant, too unimportant, to believe that God would want to help us. Saved yes, but help for those intractable problems too?

There are two sides to salvation: what God does and has done through Jesus and our obedient response to this. This is what underlies Paul's instruction to Timothy to remember Jesus Christ, raised from the dead with a reminder that it is dying with Jesus and remaining faithful to him that produces salvation.

For Paul the salvation that we obtain is what happens after we die as is implicit in John 3:16:

For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.

The salvation for the ten lepers has to do with eternal life beginning now, with healing and wholeness, just as it is for Naaman.

But Naaman would not have been healed if he had continued to allow logic to govern his understanding of Elisha's command to wash clean in a dirty river. But all credit to Naaman, he is healed after he allows himself to be persuaded by his servants to obey the instruction faithfully, seven times.

So instead of pride and anger he becomes respectful of Elisha and returns to thank him in person. Pride and disrespect are replaced by faithfulness and respect, respect expressed as gratitude.

Sadly, we cannot say the same for all ten lepers. Only one returned to thank Jesus, maybe even before he saw the priest, and he too was a foreigner. What did the others think? Did they have a sense of entitlement, of self-righteousness? Did they take the blessing for granted? Do we? Is there a real heart of thankfulness within us as we hear and say the words in the Eucharistic prayer? "Eucharistic" being a word originating from the Greek word of thanksgiving. Or do we take salvation for granted? Is Jesus saying, "Where are you?" to us?

Where do you see yourself in this story? Where do I? Leprosy was a very obvious need; it couldn't be ignored. But maybe our needs are not so obvious.

Perhaps known only to ourselves and those closest to us. Have we dared to believe that God could help us – would love to help us – and asked him to do so? Or has something held us back?

There is an obvious thread which runs through our readings which we both note and can also ignore. It is that of healing. The king of Israel rightly implies that only God can heal.

And we believe that too don't we, at least to some extent, when we pray for David and Ian to be healed of pneumonia, expecting as we do that God will use medical services and antibiotics to bring about the cure? And he does.

But what of praying to God to intervene directly, perhaps in a different situation, perhaps when the healing needed is for relationships or inner hurt? Do we ask for him to intervene then?

I should like for us now to spend a few moments quietly before God asking him to show us our healing needs and whether we are willing to open them up to him. And then, at the end of the service, if you would like, maybe come and speak to me, or Nick or any one of us here this morning and ask us to speak to God with you – in confidence – about those needs. I know I should love to pray with you.

Amen.

Chris Shaw, 9 October 2022