

Year C Pentecost 4 6th July 2025

Life can be so difficult and complicated, can't it? Quite often some of that is of our own making, but just as often the complications are caused by things out of our control.

Who could have predicted a couple of years ago that the world security situation would have got so precarious that European countries would look seriously at doubling the money they spend on defence as a proportion of their economies?

Who would have predicted the incredibly rapid rise of AI to the point where it's already so sophisticated that it's making it harder for young people to get entry level jobs.

And yet our Old Testament and Gospel readings in particular remind us that we can unnecessarily overcomplicate our lives because we can't bring ourselves to think that sometimes God wants to make things easy for us.

Look at Naaman, the Syrian general, who is afflicted by what the Bible calls leprosy, but what scholars think is more likely to have been a very unsightly skin complaint. It doesn't really matter which it is, the point is that Naaman, one of the most important men in Syria after the King, can't find a doctor who can heal him for all his power and wealth. Instead, an unnamed Israelite slave girl plucks up the courage to say Well, I know a prophet back home who can help you.

To cut the story short, Naaman turns up at Elisha's front door, laden with gold, silver and fancy clothes to give to Elisha. And what happens. Elisha can't even be bothered to open his front door to greet his visitor. Instead, he sends a message telling Naaman to go and wash in the River Jordan. I don't know how many of you have seen the River Jordan, but it's more like the Lyne than the Tweed, and pretty muddy to boot. It's certainly not one of the great rivers of the world, and Naaman duly felt insulted, basically saying stuff that for a game of monkeys. He expected someone of his importance and stature to be treated with great respect and was furious when he felt he had been disrespected

It's at that point that his servant shows real understanding of human psychology and how God works. If Elisha had told you to do something complicated and difficult, he says, you would have done it without hesitation.

They know their master, that Naaman wants to earn his healing as it were. So if you were prepared to do the difficult thing why not try the simple thing, the easier thing, they ask. And so Naaman does. He washes himself seven times, enough times to wash away his need to buy or manipulate his way into God's healing presence.

And that's an important lesson for us to learn. Hardship for hardship's sake doesn't necessarily usher in God's healing presence. Namaan found healing when he was willing to come into God's presence.

Namaan is a good example of how God sometimes works through the easy. It reminds me of that old joke about the Christian caught up in a flood who takes refuge on his roof and rejects offers of help from the rescue crew in the speedboat and then from the helicopter search and rescue team saying God is going to save him. Of course, he drowns, and when he gets to the pearly gates, he asks Peter why God didn't save him. Well we tried to was the response, but you kept turning us down.

Or as one commentator put it, the healing you need is often right in front of you.

I want to digress for a moment to talk about the theology of healing because in a sense I have been rather lax in my use of the word healing, using it in a way that encompasses both cure and a more complete well-being. A great example of what I mean is Luke's story of the woman who had been bleeding for 12 years. It stopped as soon as she touched Jesus' cloak and it was then that she was cured.

But it was only when Jesus insisted she come forward and explain publicly what had happened that she was in a position to regain her place in society and it was only at that point that she was fully healed. Because, like Naaman with his leprosy, up until that point she was an outcast from society who nobody wanted to be near.

Those who specialise in the theology of healing would tell you that, for instance, you can be cured of cancer but that healing takes longer. Or that you can be healed as a result of being in the presence of God without necessarily being cured.

Susan Sontag, the American writer, once wrote that all of us hold dual citizenship, in the kingdom of the well and the kingdom of the sick. There are

times when we have to decide which passport we are carrying, because sometimes we are obliged to identify ourselves as being in the kingdom of the sick. But whichever kingdom we are. In, the key is to focus on the presence of God, something that is not as simple as we like to think.

To return to today's readings, the lesson to draw from the Gospel isn't much different from our Old Testament reading. Jesus gives very simple instructions to the 72 – possibly a symbolic number, mirroring the number of elders appointed by Moses together with the two on whom the Spirit fell. Don't take a purse or sandals, eat what you're given, stay with one family, give them your peace, tell them the kingdom of heaven is near. That's it. Every week we share the peace before the Eucharist, and that stems from Jesus's words to the 72.

How sad it is that we Christians, who are supposed to be the bearers of God's peace, so often seem to be in conflict, as often with ourselves as with other people. God is love, but so often that is not the impression we give to others

If your offer of peace is rejected, Jesus says, it will be returned to you, and move on. In other words, don't waste your time on people who aren't interested in what you have to say, there are plenty of others who are.

One of the reasons Jesus emphasised the giving and returning of peace was that so many of his contemporaries didn't want peace with either the Samaritans or the Romans. But Jesus wasn't interested in fighting evil with evil. The 72 were in effect charged with telling Israel it was in the last-chance saloon

The way Jesus puts it to the 72 sounds so easy, and yet that is precisely why it is so hard, because it seems suspiciously easy. But the point is that we are not to be distracted by things that get in the way of proclaiming God's kingdom. That's why Jesus' words in last week's Gospel sound so harsh when he talks to those who want to follow him, but only once they have completed what in their minds are more urgent tasks.

The 72 return filled with joy because having followed their instructions they have indeed seen the kingdom of heaven draw near, not least in healings that may have been as instantaneous and spectacular as Naaman's.

They sound almost swollen-headed as they tell Jesus what they have accomplished, but the reality is we don't accomplish anything for God, rather God accomplishes his purposes through us

There are a number of points to note about the 72, first that they were sent out in pairs, we are not required to do this sort of stuff on our own, we work with others. Secondly that the group almost certainly contained women because they were among Jesus' followers and thirdly that it is symbolic of the whole church – in other words telling others of the Good News is the responsibility of us all, old and young.

Jesus' instructions were straightforward and simple. Above any theology, the key instruction was for the disciples to tell people that the kingdom of God was near. The bit we find difficult is girding ourselves up to go out to them, because we can't expect them to come to us.

If people aren't interested we shouldn't take it personally, it's not us they're rejecting, it's God and God's shoulders are broad enough to deal with that.

But if they are interested then that opens opportunities for the kingdom to come near to them. We don't have to have an answer for every question, keep it simple and say all I know is what God has done for me and explain what it is that God has done. That's enough.

How do we discern God's will for us? Well, it's not that complicated. Jesus tells us what the two great commandments are, and the prophet Micah spells it out in slightly different words. Do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with God.

Both our Old Testament and Gospel readings upend our expectations, don't they? Naaman is all about reversals, a story where the slave girl and the servant see what God is about better than generals and kings, where fancy clothes are abandoned for full immersion in a muddy river. The Gospel spells out how abundance flows from simplicity.

We mustn't think that God's ways are always difficult and complicated, that his demands on us are always difficult and complicated. They're not.

We don't need to overcomplicate things. In fact, the more we overcomplicate things the harder God will find it to accomplish his purposes through us.

We need to keep things simple, be committed to being faithful rather than successful and not worry about what is outside our control because ultimately, and thankfully, God is going to have the final word.