

## Kings 5:1-14 Naaman the Syrian, cured of his leprosy

The story of Naaman is absolutely fascinating. It comes in the book of Kings, in the four hundred years or so between Solomon and the destruction of Jerusalem by Babylon. It forms a self-contained tale in the midst of Israel's general downward spiral towards Godlessness.

You've heard the story, but I want to pick out some details before we conclude what it meant at its time, and what this might mean to us today.

The first detail is the role of servants. The whole story sits on the foundation of servants knowing things, and being listened to. Firstly, there is an Israelite girl, who has been taken as a slave for Naaman's wife: she says, "If only my master would see the prophet who is in Samaria! He would cure him of his leprosy." — And the amazing thing is that Mrs Naaman clearly listens to her, and shares this thought with Naaman, who does not dismiss it, but takes it to his king, to get permission to go down to Israel. This is quite incredible!

When Elisha has heard about this and advised the king to send Naaman to him, he does not go out to meet Naaman at the door. Instead, he sends a servant to meet him, and the servant passes on the message to wash seven times in the Jordan. Unsurprisingly, Naaman — described as a great man, and who has been sent with his own king's letter of introduction to the king of Israel — is a bit nonplussed to be both sent away from the king of Israel, *and* then met by the prophet's servant. He reacts angrily.

And it is left to his own servant to turn him around with real wisdom. "My father, if the prophet had told you to do some great thing, would you not have done it? How much more, then, when he tells you, 'Wash and be cleansed'!" The servant cuts through Naaman's sense of his own dignity, and says — just do it! If Naaman had refused to listen to any of these servants, he would not have been healed.

Secondly this story plays with assumptions. The first assumption: Naaman assumes that if there is a prophet in Israel that prophet must be the leader of the people. How would God's mouthpiece not be the leader of the people? The second assumption is that for a healing to happen it must be paid for — talents of silver and thousands of shekels of gold, and clothing too. The third assumption is that of the Israelite king: surely Naaman knows I can't heal him? This visit must be in order to set up a pretext to war! Finally, Naaman assumes that the quality of the river must have something to do with his healing. I've seen the Jordan river: it's narrower than the Waveney, it's not particularly distinguished. Why would anyone choose that river for a miraculous washing? Naaman thinks his own local rivers are better. But all the assumptions are wrong. God's prophets are the outspoken critics of Israel's kings. God is not interested in wealth, and nor are his true prophets. God is more interested in obedience and humility.

So, yes, thirdly this story is all about humility. Naaman is a great man, highly regarded, the field marshal of the Syrian army, highly respected by the king. He carries wealth, he speaks to kings, and none of that gets him anywhere. What enables his healing is listening to a slave girl, listening to Elisha's servant, listening to his own servant, and doing the foolish-seeming thing of washing seven times in the muddy old Jordan. Elisha even refuses his wealth. He is told that he can give nothing in recompense. What he has is useless to purchase what he wants. Instead, he has to give away something a little more precious still (yet entirely free) — a bit of his own ego.

Naaman is not the only one humbled in this story: The king of Israel is reminded that for all the power he wields there is someone in Israel with more power: Elisha, who has God's favour, and who, consequently, can do what no one else can.

Our reading ends with the healing. But the story goes on: Naaman goes back to Elisha and admits that there is no God in all the world except in Israel. He offers a gift again. This is now a gift in gratitude, not a 'fee'. *Still* Elisha refuses. The story goes on, too, to talk about Gehazi, a servant of Elisha, who chases after Naaman once he has left, and claims that Elisha has changed his mind and accepted Naaman's gift. His reward for his deceit? Elisha knows what has happened at once, and Gehazi is instantly covered in leprosy.

To the first readers of Kings this is a story of one man's humility, and a reminder (like the story of Ruth, for example), that sometimes gentiles could respond more wholly and honestly to God than Israelites. We might see it as analogous to an Old Testament 'Good Samaritan' story, and it's the sort of thing that Jesus frequently reminded the pharisees about.

For me, as I reflected on this passage, it is a reminder that God's love is free and real, and costs us nothing. We don't earn God's love or healing. Nor can we buy it. God is not impressed by our money in the least. And yet God's love and salvation doesn't come free! It comes at the cost of our being changed through humility. That humility may be a very high demand for some. Our social identity is usually wrapped up in class, education, the postcode we live in, the car we drive, the fashions we wear, the people we mingle with. Naaman's story categorically tells us to get over this, as Naaman had to. To think less of our dignity, so that God can heal us in the power of the dignity he gives us — to know that our wealth and social position didn't earn us that — but God's love gave it to us for free.

Naaman's story is, of course, also a story about God meeting us in our suffering, with compassion.

Perhaps as we finish we might reflect with these questions:

1. Where does God meet you?
2. How freely do you accept God's love?
3. Do you still try to deserve it?
4. How much of who you are is empowered by God's love, rather than your own sense of dignity?

Father God, we are born naked, and we can take nothing with us when we die. Our health and our salvation are in your hands. Thank you that you meet us, welcome us, heal us, forgive us and transform us, in your love, by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Amen.