

## **SERMON: 07 July 2019 – Rev Alistair Cowper**

### **“ Skin Diseases and Sacred Earth” (2 Kings 5:1-27 and Luke 10:1-11, 16-20)**

Elisha, the new prophet who replaced Elijah, is a type of Christ.

He is shaped in the mould of Christ. He is the anointed presence of God. We can see it in his words and in his actions.

Since we left Elisha last week, having been anointed as the new prophet, he's been busy. He's been performing miracles. His first miracle is to heal the waters of Jericho by throwing salt into it. One of Jesus' first miracles was turning water into wine.

The Elisha helps a poor widow pay her debts with olive oil which kept flowing until all her neighbours' empty jars were filled.

Again, it sounds a bit like Jesus, filling water jars with wine, and coming to the aid of widows and orphans.

And then there's the raising from the dead of the widow's son, when he stretches himself out on top of the dead boy and the child's body starts to grow warm again and he opens his eyes. Actually he doesn't open his eyes immediately. Elisha has to repeat the procedure before the child sneezes 7 times and then opens his eyes.

Like Jesus, healing the blind man in stages and raising the dead boy and the dead girl and of course Lazarus.

Then there was the miracle of the feeding of the 100 prophets with 20 small loaves. Not quite the feeding of the 5,000 but the same idea, the same Source, the same Power, the same Spirit, the anointing Presence of God, a type of Christ, a glimpse of Christ.

Then we come to chapter 5 and we find the miraculous healing of Naaman, an amazing story of the Lord at work even in foreigners and enemies.

We read that the Lord had given Aram great victories despite the Arameans being arch enemies of the Israelites.

We can see God's hand at work, quietly and purposely in the background.

God is working through a young servant girl who has been taken captive as a slave and exiled to Aram, probably Damascus, to serve her master and mistress, who happen to be Naaman, the commander of the Arabian army.

How often God chooses to work through women. Think of the Hebrew midwives in Egypt, or Rahab in Jericho delivering the spies, or Ruth sticking with her mother in law through loss and hard times, and so on. But so many of the women God works through are not named, like this young slave girl, who knows the Lord and knows the Lord's prophet Elisha. Her faith will win the day.

And so the day comes when she gets the chance to speak openly with her mistress. Notice, its the women who are doing all the ground work in this story of salvation! If it weren't for them, and for this conversation they were having, it might never have happened. God would've had to find another way to get the attention of the Arameans.

(2 stories from the news whereby men struggle to find peace - the attack on the oil tanker in Iran; the transition to a civil government in Sudan).

It's Naaman's wife who presents Naaman with the challenge. We're not told how she put it to him. Was it something like, "you're gonna have to do something about that skin disease of yours, there's dead skin lying all over the place and I can't stand the sight of those blotches or the sound of your scratching"?

Or was it, "you know I was talking to our maid the other day, she was telling me about this miracle worker, good at skin diseases apparently, you should go and try him out"?

However she did it, she managed to persuade Naaman to speak to the king about it and the king encourages him to go and see the prophet. Although they are enemies, the Arameans recognise there are prophets in Israel, and clearly there are diplomatic relationships between the king of Aram and the king of Israel.

Although King Joram of Israel is offended when he receives the letter asking for Naaman's leprosy to be healed, Elisha hears about it and sees it as an opportunity to let the Arameans see that there is a true prophet in Israel.

But Naaman takes offence when he arrives at Elisha's house and Elisha doesn't bother to meet him face to face but tells him to go and wash in the Jordan River 7 times and he'll be healed.

Naaman thinks he deserves to be treated with more respect. Now, left to his own devices he would have walked away at that point and remain unhealed.

Think what his wife might have said when he got home. "You did what?"

Thankfully Naaman was humble enough to listen to his officers advice and he goes and washes in the Jordan and finds himself healed.

What about us? Would we have done the same? Would we have allowed the offence to rob us of a blessing? Or would we be humble enough to take advice from those junior to us? Would we be willing to do something culturally weird if God asked it of us or in the hope that a blessing might result?

This story is often read in church and stops at verse 14 but the story continues and it gets even more interesting.

Elisha doesn't want to receive a gift from Naaman for his healing. Maybe it was gift enough for Elisha to see that Naaman had come to faith in the one true God of Israel.

That would be payment enough wouldn't it? If we knew that what we did in faith had led to someone else discovering the grace of God, what more would you want? It would be payment enough to know that this man's life was changed forever and that he would go home a changed man.

Think about the conversations he'd then have at home. It wouldn't be long before his wife believed - maybe she always did - it wouldn't be long before Naaman was telling others about the God who healed him, the God who does great things, the God who could be trusted, the God worthy of all praise.

Think about how the servant girl would be seen with different eyes by Naaman. He'd always be in her debt in some way. If it hadn't have been for that wee girl's faith, he's have never found the Living God. And as Commander of the Arabian Army, Naaman had the King's ear. Soon the whole nation might be changed.

God works in quiet, mysterious, purposeful ways, even in the midst of an enslaved people in a foreign land.

But God recognises that these changes come about slowly. Naaman wants two mules worth of sacred earth. He wants to take back with him something to remind him of the earthiness of God's presence. He wants to build something new. He wants the ground he walks on to be sacred earth. And he wants to know that even though he has to live in a pagan worshipping environment as part of his job, that he will be alright in the end.

God knows the compromises that sometimes people have to make in the meantime and his word to them is 'go in peace'.

We might find ourselves in a work place where the values are not always Godly. Whilst we're called there to make changes as we live out the Good News as disciples of Christ, there might be times when we need to be alongside people in their search for truth and meaning. In those times, we can know peace.

And maybe the last thing to point out from the story of Naaman is to think about what Gehazi did. Gehazi, Naaman's servant, sees the opportunity to make a fast buck, or maybe its just his sense of justice that is offended. He doesn't think Naaman should have gone away without paying, after all, Naaman had offered to give a gift. And if Elisha wasn't going to accept it, then maybe here was a chance for Gehazi to cash in.

Well, it doesn't start well. He has to make up a lie to make it sound real. Naaman, however, is keen to part with his silver and Gehazi stashes the loot in a hiding place in his house. You can almost smell his guilt from afar.

You can't hide that sort of behaviour from God. The Lord knows the heart and he sees the mind. It's not the way God works and so it's easily exposed. God doesn't miss a thing.

That's why Elisha says, "don't you realise I was there with you in spirit when Naaman stepped down from his chariot to meet you?" And so the leprosy that belonged to Naaman now clung to Gehazi. Sin has it's consequence and will need to be dealt with. Gehazi would be ceremonially unclean for at least 7 days but at least there was provision in the Law for dealing with skin diseases, so that he could be restored to the community after he'd paid the price.

Elisha confronts Gehazi with 'this isn't the time to receive money and clothing, olive groves and vineyards, sheep and cattle, and male and female servants.

A bit like when Jesus commissions his disciples to go out in twos, lambs among wolves, not needing money, bag, or extra sandals.

They weren't to worry about those things. Those things would be taken care of. What mattered then and matters now, is living out the Kingdom of God with authority over all the power of the enemy, crushing the snakes and scorpions that seek to poison the world with greed, corruption, exploitation, arrogance and violence.

Jesus called people to follow him, to live differently, to be like him and in doing so, to discover life in all its fullness.

May these words and stories inspire us and speak to each of us, as to how to go on living in this world, as citizens of God's heavenly kingdom.

May there be something that we have heard today, or will hear today, that will inspire faith in us and in those around us.

In Jesus' name. Amen.