

12 February 2012

Reading: 2 Kings 5:1-14 (OT P373)
Reader: Bob Rendall

Background to the reading

In our reading this morning there a few things that I need to explain in order for us to understand the text in its wider context.

Our reading is quite a surprise – in the sense that it deals not with an Israelite as the main character but actually an enemy of Israel, a commander in the Enemy's army. I am talking now of Naaman of Aram.

Aram refers to what we know as Syria. The word Aram means high, or highlands, and as the name of a country denotes that elevated region extending from the northeast of Palestine to the Euphrates, that included Damascus. There was always war between Israel and Aram and it is well known that the armies of Aram

invaded Israel several times taking people as slaves which also is evident in our reading.

Naaman was a very important man who had leprosy. The Hebrew word “Tsaraat” that is translated as “leprosy” however is unfortunate since the word refers to a wider range of skin diseases. And we know that the Biblical leprosy is not the same as what we know today as “leprosy”. We find in the Old Testament a clear description of the disease, as well as the regulations connected with it. In the Jewish society Lepers were required to live outside the camp or city in fear of contamination. He had further to warn passers-by to keep away from him, by calling out, ‘Unclean! unclean!’ nor could he speak to any one, or receive or return a salutation, since in the East this involves an embrace.”

In the case of Naaman, it seems as if in his society “lepers” were treated differently. They were not isolated and excluded from the Syrian society.

So in our text it says that this important man had leprosy and most probably was quite uncomfortable. So it just so happened that a “slave-girl” from Israel told Naaman’s wife about the prophet Elisha who told Naaman. So Naaman then went to his own king to get a letter to go to the king of Israel. The king of Syria at this time was Benhadad II and the king of Israel Joram. Slavery was accepted Old Testament as part of the world in which Israel functioned. It was not abolished but regulated. The legal codes for that regulation and the numerous texts that reflect Israel’s development in this domain indicate an increasing humanization of slavery in contrast to the rest of the ancient Near East. The Hebrew slave was more protected than those of other nationalities. The Old Testament raised the status of the slave from property to that of a human

being who happened to be owned by another person. The fact that Israel was enslaved in Egypt may have influenced this development. So this slave girl would have been in quite a “difficult and trying situation”.

When Naaman reached the king of Israel, the king suspected in this some evil design against him, and torn his clothes. Elisha the prophet hearing of this, sent for Naaman. When Naaman arrived, the prophet sent him the message through a messenger telling him to go and wash himself in the Jordan seven times. It must have been quite an insult to this important man especially in those days when it was all about honor and shame. To think that the prophet cannot even come and speak to him!

He was furious and refused to wash himself in the Jordan. He immediately thinks of his own country and the two important rivers that he knew. Why can't he

just go and wash him in his own native rivers the Abana and Pharpar rivers of Damascus. His complaint was justified, for the Abana (modern Barada river is a swift, clean, abundant stream descending from the snows of Mt. Hermon. The Pharpar river (modern Nahr el-Barada) watered together with the Abana the fertile Damascus oasis.

It is also interesting to note the relevance of the number seven. In the Old Testament the number seven was important and closely linked to all the ritual practises in the temple. Noah had to take 7 of each of all the clean animals, Abraham gave Abimelech seven lambs, seven Rams and bulls was required in sacrifices, the Blood was sprinkled seven times. The Israelites compassed Jericho seven times, on the seventh day sounding seven trumpets. So in a sense this was not just a “washing” but a ritual cleansing washing ceremony like what usually happened in the temple.

And then: well Naaman discovered that he was healed by God and confessed: “Now I know that there is no God in all the world except in Israel.”

The rest of our story - well it is all about money.....and the tragic outcome of when people misuse it. But that is another story for another day.

Amen

MP 760 v 1,2,5 When we walk with the Lord

Sermon

The text verses for the sermon are Verse 2 & 3: Now bands from Aram had gone out and had taken captive a young girl from Israel, and she served Naaman’s wife.

³ She said to her mistress, “If only my master would see the prophet who is in Samaria! He would cure him of his leprosy.”

So let us refresh our memories again. Naaman was a very important man – an enemy of Israel and someone who did nae know the Almighty God.

In his house there worked a slave girl from Israel who told Naaman's wife about Elisha.

And then amidst all the politics he eventually reaches the prophet who does nae make a big fuss over him or his importance or even the fact that he is a gentile enemy of Israel.

Most probably Naaman felt that he was treated like the enemy. However he reluctantly washed himself and was healed. And then he confessed that there is only ONE God – the God of Israel.

But what amazes me in our reading is the fact that nothing happens just by chance.

Let us look now at the lives of some of the characters:

The slave-girl: Can you imagine what her life must have been like? - Someone in a foreign country with no rights and with no status - Someone that was just like a wee piece of furniture. I am sure she must have thought: what was she doing there? Where is God? Does He have a plan for her life? Well, hallo, He had indeed a big plan for her. She was instrumental to Naaman coming to faith. She might have thought that she is nae worth a lot but in the end she was a mighty instrument in the hands of God!

Naaman a very important man who expected everyone to stand in ceremony even God. He expected a big miracle with glamorous effects. But God works differently. It is Him that heals. The method does nae count. To God it is not a show but a genuine interest in the well being of Naaman.

So what can we learn from this?

I meet so many people of faith that seems to feel inadequate to live out their faith – to speak to others about their faith – to be a witness of God's grace and love. It seems as if people think that faith is only visible on a Sunday while the rest of the week it goes in hiding!

The slave girl didnae hide her faith. She knew that if there is one that would heal Naaman, then it is God. She openly spoke out which could have an impact on her relationship with her master.

We do not have to hide our faith. Our faith can make such a big difference in the lives of many people. We can offer them the love that was visible through Jesus Christ, love that seeks no return and love that conquers all. We can offer them the hope of the

everlasting life. But above all, we honestly can tell that nothing in this world happens by chance but by the working of God's Holy Spirit.

People call it different names like a "God moment" or "God incident" which is not really a good expression. We know that everything on this earth is controlled by God and not only glimpses, or moments or instances or incidents. God is everywhere and can turn any moment into an opportunity like the true story that I heard.

I am going to change the setting and the circumstances to protect the identity of the people involved.

There was a wee girl who could nae walk without ugly braces on her legs. But her mother explained to her that although she struggled to walk, she still could use her brain, she could smile, she could see, hear and use her hands. There were indeed so many things to be

thankful for that the braces on her legs didnae matter at all. So one day as they went shopping another wee boy stopped and openly stared at her much to the embarrassment of his parents. He then asked the girl with some disgust: What is that on your legs! The girl replied with no hesitation: It is braces to help me walk, but you know what I have so many things to be thankful for: I can smile, I can see, hear and I can use my brain, and my hands! After which the boy then just walked away with his parents.

A week later the mum and the wee girl was on a train and as the train stopped she struggled to help her girl and carry the bags. Another woman came to her and offered to help which she accepted with gladness. As they stepped from the train the woman said: you do not recognise me but I am the mother of the boy who embarrassedly asked your girl about her braces on her legs. You didnae know this: but actually we just found

out that from the doctors that he has a rare eye condition which could lead to total blindness. We didn't know what and how to tell him until your daughter gave us the answer.

This is indeed a typical example of how God works in the lives of ordinary people like you and me. I am sure you also have many similar stories to tell. We must just be willing to be instruments in the Almighty Hands of God.

We are in this community to make a difference because this is where God wants us to show our faith, hope and love. If we are not witnesses of his grace every moment of everyday, we have no right to exist. But if we become vehicles, instruments of His Gospel – telling others about his saving grace, showing love and support to all the things that matter to this community like financial contributions to the repairing of

gravestones that has been damaged, providing food on the galaday, offering a safe place for the children during the August holiday club, and providing venues for events. It is then that people of this community will see the difference and appreciate the Mighty presence of our Lord and Saviour.

May we continue to be witnesses of God's presence not only in this community, but everywhere we go. May we tell everyone about the discovery of Naaman who expected God to appear and heal him with a big show – that God does nae work in this way. He is not interested in shows of pretence. He sees our hearts and He cares about you and me as persons whom He created with a mission namely to show His forgiving love everywhere we go.

Amen