

SERMON FOR TRINITY 17 | 09.10.2022

2 Kings 5: 1-3, 7-15c; 2 Timothy 2: 8-15; St Luke 17: 11-19

We have two exceptionally rich stories to play with this morning as our set readings. The first, about Naaman from the 2nd book of Kings was actually written about 900 years before Jesus - in that mad period after the death of King David's son Solomon when the political situation in Israel was not unlike what is going on in the east of Ukraine right now – so it is amazing that there is anything there worth bothering with. And the second one, our Gospel, is about the Ten Lepers, a story that gets to me every time I read it because it is just so absolutely bang on the nail. And both stories take us to an issue which is becoming all too familiar.

But let's start with Naaman. Now we have seen rather a lot of senior military top brass recently because of the Queen's funeral. And we know that no one gets one of those jobs without being a pretty formidable 'leader'. And that is what Naaman was: he was chief of staff to the King of Aram. He was bright, he was tough and he was used to telling other people what to do. But he had somehow picked up leprosy. As I have written in the Weekly News sheet, leprosy was the biggest threat in society at that time, with the same vibes as having cancer. Actually, in some ways it was worse because it was so contagious and everyone, but everyone, would have kept their distance from Naaman; if he had been poorer and less influential he would have been slung out of town into the local graveyard and left to rot.

It doesn't take much imagination to feel the most awful glass wall that would have existed between him and everyone else; over time the loneliness would have been absolutely crippling. He might be able to give orders as head of the military but no one was going to sit down and talk to him: eat with him or sleep with him. He was totally alone.

And as we know, that does terrible things to people. Lonely people so easily lose their hold on reality, lose their sense of proportion, become entirely ego-centric are easily deluded about what is actually happening.

And then a slave girl comes along with some advice: *go and see the prophet Elisha, he'll sort you out.* But Naaman is a big cheese and she is a slave, less than nothing. Why would he take a blind bit of notice?

It might be the better part of 3000 years old but we can still hear the mental anguish that Naaman goes through at various stages in this story – not just when dealing with his slave-girl but again when the prophet Elisha refuses to meet him personally. *Go and wash in the Jordan is all he gets via some servant...*

It was just before Christmas in 2017 that 14 year old Mollie Russell took her own life. Last Friday her father Ian stood in front of the press cameras and talked about the kinds of on-line materials that his daughter had been accessing. Apparently, in the six months before she died she had saved, liked or shared 2,100 pieces of content related to suicide, self-harm and depression - including a range of drawings graphic images. Most of the content had been carried on Instagram and the press conference was being called to push for new laws to stop platforms like Instagram from carrying material seemingly encouraging self harm.

Two parents that had suffered in a similar way to Ian were talking about these issues on the radio. With immense bravery they talked about the mental stresses that teenagers have to cope with today. They talked about the bullying their children had endured, about the taunts about their size and looks that had haunted their young lives. They talked so movingly about the way that social media encouraged secrecy in their children, of how they would spend endless hours in the bedrooms away from the influence of their parents and their siblings. They described the pain they felt when their children ‘put a brave face’ on their torment and how difficult it had been to get them to open up about what they were thinking and feeling. It was Naaman’s isolation, his fear and resentment all over again.

And there in the story is the person who made all the difference: the slave girl who had the courage to break into Naaman’s locked world. *Go and see Elisha*. Time and time again the parents criticised themselves for not having done enough to listen to their young people, for not having made issues like depression and loneliness ‘normal’ topics of family conversation – not as set piece discussions but as part and parcel of the school run or a trip to the shops.

And as I listened, today’s other story came to mind, Jesus’ healing of the ten lepers. Like Naaman these ten would have been outcasts in their communities and the opportunity to be cured by Jesus must have seemed like winning the lottery.

Go and show yourselves to the priests would have got each of them their citizenship status back and life could begin again. So how could it be that only one came back to say thank you – and he a foreigner and, in those times, one of the least tolerated because he was a Samaritan.

What must have been going through Jesus' head at that moment as nine of the ten didn't give him a second look? Wasn't he desperately disappointed? But surely we are asking the wrong question. Those who help the traumatised and the sick – whether from disease or from mental pain and anxiety - are not in it for themselves. All that matters is that someone has been able to stand alongside the person they love and care for as they go through all the ups and downs that go without being made whole again. How easy it would have been for Naaman's family to have given up during his shouting and swearing about which river to wash in! But in all that detail is the call for patience and perseverance to be part and parcel of what it means to be involved in healing. Healing demands time – on those school runs; it demands empathy – not just offering the first solution that comes to mind; and it demands being willing to be overlooked and forgotten at the moment when someone gets better. We won't be thanked - and if we are true to our calling, we really won't have to mind.

Whether it is the leprosy of yesteryear or the contemporary effects of exposure to the dark side of the internet, society has always been affected by depression and poor self-image. People around us are desperately lonely and they are often maddeningly difficult to look after. But the example of the lone slave girl, standing alongside a powerful man out of his mind with a concern only for himself, might well serve as a model for us as we 'put up' with those who come across as entirely self-absorbed, selfish – and ungrateful.

Jesus didn't claw back the healing of the nine; they didn't suddenly find themselves reinfected because they failed to thank him! But he is truly delighted when the stranger, the Samaritan outcast, was able to go beyond simple healing into a much richer life because of this experience. As we can on those blessed occasions when people are not just physically or mentally healed but who then discover that being a person of grace and thankfulness is one of the most beautiful things that we can be. And it is from that 'wellness' that we hold out our hands to Naaman and all who are troubled – doing all we can to break through walls of secrecy and frustration, not for thanks but because, like Jesus and that slave girl, we are willing to just 'be there'.