

Sermon preached by Sister Margaret Anne for Third Sunday after Trinity 10am Sung Eucharist St Mary's Barnes 7 July 2019

Both of our readings today are about the ministry and mission of those sent by God to promote God's work and loving service in the world. The focus of our first reading is on a central aspect of God's mission in the world that is all about healing and wholeness. The reading is taken from the Second Book of Kings (2 Kings 5.1-14) and is about one of the achievements of God's servant the prophet Elisha through his healing ministry. Healing is a big subject, and it is certainly prominent in the life and ministry of Jesus. The story we have today from the Old Testament involves an army commander called Naaman. He was in charge of the King of Aram's military. Just like any other human being, despite being such a mighty warrior, he nevertheless had his vulnerabilities. In his case, it was physical – leprosy – a severe skin disease that in Biblical times had attached to it a real social stigma. All the more impressive then that he managed to achieve such a high-ranking position and to have carried out victorious exploits.

An Israelite girl who had been taken prisoner by the Arameans knew that there was a prophet in Samaria who could cure Naaman. This becomes known to the King of Aram, who writes to the King of Israel to have Naaman cured. After some initial misunderstanding, the message eventually gets through to Elisha, the prophet in question. We need to remember that Naaman and Elisha are on opposite sides, in terms of national hostilities. So when Naaman arrives at Elisha's house, Elisha doesn't go out to meet him face to face. Instead he sends a messenger. Naaman objects to the message. For Naaman is told to wash in the Jordan river seven times, and then he will be cured. This is too much for Naaman's pride. He makes various protestations. After some helpful intervention and advice from his servants, however, in the end Naaman agrees to Elisha's strange demands. He immerses himself seven times in the Jordan, and his flesh is completely restored. And more than that, he comes to realise, just after the end of today's reading, that Elisha's God is indeed God – the only God.

It's a curious story, and may seem somewhat far-fetched to our modern ears. But if we follow the story closely, we can discover a thread of truth in it that can be relevant to any age. In this story Naaman is physically healed. His leprous skin is restored completely. He is cured of his disease. But healing is not always about physical cure. Often healing can come about within, without necessarily any outward, physical cure – but rather inner healing, at an emotional and spiritual level. And emotional and spiritual healing can be just as real and effective even though it is not visible. Yes, Naaman does receive physical healing, but I think it can be seen from the story that he also receives healing at other levels than the physical as well. He was a man who had achieved much, and he was also no doubt a very proud man. He was used to giving orders, not receiving them. And when we are proud, and in control, doing well, successful and all seems to be going well, then sometimes the only way God can really get through to us is through our weakness, our vulnerability.

And that is what God did with Naaman. God reached out to Naaman through Naaman's greatest vulnerability – his leprosy, or whatever skin condition it was that afflicted him. And Naaman is humbled. The man who daily gave orders to his servants finds himself in the embarrassing position of his servants giving wise advice to him. They make the point that if Naaman had been asked to do something difficult, would he not have done it? But to wash in the Jordan seven times was easy, so why not do it? Naaman is left speechless, and humbly does as he is told. Sometimes in life demands will be made of us, whether through other people or whether simply through circumstances, that may seem futile and unnecessary, and at best a waste of time. At such times we really do need to exercise our imaginations as well as our intellect. Might it be that this demand being made of us, senseless as it appears, will actually lead to something better, which we cannot see at the moment? In Naaman's example, it certainly did. But he had in the end to act in

obedience and trust. He had to let go of his protestations and attempt the seemingly foolish and impossible. And in so doing he was restored, not just physically, but also emotionally, psychologically and spiritually. He became a whole person, whereas before his pride had separated him off from his true nature, and even from God.

Our gospel reading from Luke (Luke 10.1-11,16-20) comes in the long section of narrative in which Jesus is journeying towards Jerusalem. Here the theme is very much explicitly of mission. This passage of the sending out of the Seventy is found only in Luke. In the previous chapter he had the sending out of the Twelve, which also comes, with variations of detail, in Matthew and Mark. The later sending out of the Seventy, peculiar to Luke, in some ancient manuscripts is referred to as that of the Seventy-Two. Scholars have debated the significance of this. It may be that an element of inclusiveness is being introduced here by Luke, prefiguring the shift of Jesus' mission from being towards the people of Israel to that of the Gentiles as well. Notice that the seventy are sent out ahead of Jesus in pairs, two by two. Here is the principle of team-work. As individuals we can do much, but together with others we can do even more. And perhaps there is an element of safety here too, an early gospel example of Safeguarding policies and practice guidance!

Jesus gives very detailed and practical advice to his followers before sending them out on mission. He knows that they will face challenges and even dangers, and he wants them to be well-prepared. Their main message, and this is true for both those who accept them and those who reject them, is that "The Kingdom of God has come near to you". The Kingdom of God – that is the central focus of Jesus' mission on earth – to show others what God, the God of love, is like, and that God in love reaches out to all, and that God's love is available to all. God's love is about making people whole, and restoring them to a life-giving relationship with God, with themselves, with others and with the whole of creation.

The seventy return joyfully from their successful mission. Jesus places all that they are doing in a wider context. What they are doing echoes heaven itself. Jesus has given his followers authority over evil, and this victory over evil has already been accomplished in heavenly realms. Satan has fallen from heaven. The time has come for God's Kingdom to be joyfully proclaimed. So what does this say to us? Do we think this passage is relevant only to those who are very explicitly and actively involved in mission? To clergy, to readers, to preachers and evangelists? Obviously the passage is relevant to such people, but I think we would be very much mistaken if we felt that was exclusively so. As baptised Christians we are all involved in the promotion of the values of the Kingdom of God. As baptised Christians we have all made promises to turn to Christ, to repent of our sins, and to renounce evil, in such or similar words. This is a daily, life-long task. This does not end with our baptism, it goes on to our dying day. And at different stages in our lives it will mean taking on new and sometimes challenging commitments.

Whenever we make vows or promises in our lives, it is a good idea to review them from time to time. Clergy renew their ordination vows each year at the special service on Maundy Thursday morning at the cathedral, when the oils are also blessed. From time to time it might also be a good idea as Christians to look once more at our baptismal vows, perhaps while we are on retreat. And to ask ourselves searching questions about how we are fulfilling these vows in specific, practical ways in our daily lives. We don't all have to be great evangelists. But we do all as Christians have the call by God to find ways in which to express our love for Christ. Let us be encouraged by the closing words of the poem by the Jesuit priest-poet Gerard Manley Hopkins – "As Kingfishers Catch Fire", which boldly claims that in this life we are all called to be expressions of "Christ – for Christ plays in ten thousand places,
Lovely in limbs, and lovely in eyes not his
To the Father through the features of men's faces".

