

2 Kings 5:1-14

Psalm 30

1 Corinthians 9:24 - 27

Mark 1:40 - 45

Beautiful music from simple things...

Most of us have visited some of the great cathedrals of Britain and Europe and know what it is like to be in the presence of such grandeur with all its detail and complexity. There are many carvings and scenes in glass, each of which means something. On one of the exterior walls of Chartres Cathedral in France there is an incongruous carving in stone of an Ass playing a harp. It has been there for hundreds of years, through war and peace, the lives and deaths of kings, the French Revolution, all of Napoleon's misadventures, and many changes in the cultural, philosophical and artistic climate. Presumably it will be there for many hundreds of years to come to gaze down on the changing scene of human foibles. The Ass playing a harp is a sign that God refuses all pretension and instead is capable of drawing beautiful music from simple and even ugly creatures. In other words life comes from a completely different direction than the one in which we are inclined to look.

The first reading today is an essay, which demonstrates this point. Naaman was a top Syrian military commander whose success in battle earned him the favour of the King. Then he contracted leprosy. In antiquity there was no worse fate. It was an incurable disease, which rendered a person ritually impure and delivered them to a desperate social situation. On becoming a leper the only path ahead for Naaman was total humiliation- the loss of status, rank, and position. When his life was about to deconstruct entirely a voice of hope came from an unexpected quarter. The least member of his household, a slave girl captured in a raid on Israel, told of a prophet of God in Samaria who had the power of life and healing. If he dared believe this news, a miracle might be possible but Naaman would have to travel to foreign parts to effect a cure.

Although it was the slave girl who tipped him off, the following scenes show how society normally operates. No more mention of the girl: Commander speaks to King who writes a reference to the King of Israel, assembles a fabulous pile of wealth, and sends his valued high ranking officer away to be healed. This is a royal mission! Israel's King seems to have forgotten about the prophet, and the letter and the grand entourage made him paranoid. Naaman beat him once in battle and he took this approach as a quarrelsome gesture. He thought he was being set up to fail, and would be punished in the usual way. The prophet heard of the King's problem and came to his rescue. There was no royal summons, but occasionally clergy are moved to offer help to the government. It saved the king's face. But Elisha did not do this for the king's sake. It was for the sake of God whose herald in a foreign land was a captive slave girl. Because of her, the grace of God reached new territory and another life was healed and brought to faith. This transformation came through a process, which was disdainful of all pretention - as is underlined by the scene outside Elisha's house.

Naaman rode up with his men and chariots to suffer what seems to be a rebuff. There was no grand appearance of a miraculous healer; no over the top gestures played out on a big screen above for the assembled multitude to see and applaud. There was no spectacular healing which Naaman could boast about and count amongst his long list of successes. A servant relayed a simple message: Wash seven times in the Jordan. In a puny foreign river! Why not the comfort of returning home and bathing in the fine waters of Damascus! It is the servants who talk sense: You haven't been asked to scale a great mountain, or slay 100 wild beasts: "It's not complicated - just do it!" Help comes from the corner where the donkeys are.

We know the outcome, but what are we to make of it? Our question is "how did this happen?" but that is not the point of the story. This is a story about how God's grace comes via the unpretentious, ordinary path. Naaman's willingness to enter into life at the humble end of the scale brings him the gift of healing and faith. Much like the tax collectors and sinners who came to Jesus, Naaman was in dire need. The power of death is about to empty out his life. Then he responded to the lowly servant girl's disclosure: Israel's God holds the power of life. The irony is, even Naaman's success against Israel is part of the sovereignty of this God. It brought into his house the one who showed him the path to new life, which cannot be obtained through victories, position or wealth. It is purely his receptivity to the servant girl's disclosure and his trust in undergoing a baptism like washing in the Jordan river that brings him healing, and far deeper healing, which is new faith.

The good news of this story is that God's grace is able to reach us, even when we reach the outermost limits of life. From this unexpected place may come the word that brings life, or expresses faith. The Gospel makes this clear when another leper sought help from Jesus. This discarded, person whose whole life was lived at the Donkey end of the scale, knew where to get help, and asked for it. He was outcast and despised, but like the demoniac of a few weeks back, he was able to recognize the one who had the power to help in the deepest sense. He knew where to reach the music that would create in him a new dance of life. The text is ambivalent as to whether Jesus responded in pity or anger, but the fact is Jesus chose to help him! He was asked to keep silent, but he could not restrain the joyful telling of what had happened.

When we read of lepers today it is popular to think about people who suffer from AIDS or some other form of socially stigmatizing condition. But lepers are found anywhere we have created a class of people we would not want to touch at any cost. People who are ostracized, despised and alienated because we think contact with them would be polluting or degrading, or a threat to all that we think makes for life. When we put it like that, who is it you think of?

Both these stories suggest that even there, or perhaps especially there, the transforming word of faith and life may be found.

Both these stories are parables of the human condition. We are afflicted with the worst of diseases and have no power to cure ourselves. But there is one who can help.

The gift of these stories is that they show God's grace knows none of the restrictions we allow to confine us. Grace crosses boundaries, goes into foreign territories, speaks

through the lowly and confronts the pretentious for one purpose: to show that God is capable of making something beautiful of the ugliest thing there is. God has done that most supremely in the Cross of Christ. This is a sign from the opposite end of the scale. And by learning to live according to it we may find our way to life in all its fulness and understand for ourselves how beautiful things are made.