

## **SERMON Pearls of Wisdom**

### **2 Kings 5.1-14; Mark 1.40-45**

Beloved Father, thank you for the wisdom contained in your Word. May we be forever grateful for your guiding hand. Amen.

My primary focus today is on our reading from 2 Kings. It struck me that there are at least four pearls of wisdom contained in this reading, which are well worth reflecting upon. And I will conclude with a final fifth pearl from our gospel reading.

To give some context the 2 Kings account is likely set around 800BC. Aram and Israel have gone through intermittent periods of war and peace. This is a time of relative peace though it would be a reasonable assumption that the memories of the past linger and not a great deal of trust exists between the two states. We're all too familiar with the enmity that can be passed on from generation to generation. That was particularly brought home to me during my mission to Northern Ireland last year and is tragically being played out between Israel and Gaza right now. But it can and does, sadly, occur even within our own families.

#### **First Pearl of Wisdom: Verse 1**

The reading begins with: *"<sup>1</sup> Naaman, commander of the army of the king of Aram, was a great man and in high favour with his master, because by him the Lord had given victory to Aram."* This provides the first pearl of wisdom. Naaman was victorious because the Lord intervened to allow it. The God of Israel, Yahweh, the Lord, did not just concern himself with the Jewish people. No, he has a universal interest in all his creation, whether they acknowledge Him or not. As the New Bible Commentary puts it: *"A theme which occurs at several points throughout the story is that Israel's God is the world's God; he is the only God and his power and interests are not local but cosmic in scale."* In our world of competing ideas this is the safe harbour in which we can anchor securely. There is a great German word: "weltanschauung". It translates as one's world view, the prism through which we analyse all our experiences. Whatever ideological, theological or personal prism we may consider our world through, this one verse reminds us that if it doesn't include the one and only God then our view is dangerously skewwhiff!

## **Second Pearl of Wisdom: Verses 2-4**

The next few verses provide the second pearl. We learn that Naaman, though a mighty warrior, has leprosy. We understand leprosy to be a disease that has three possible variations:

1. there is nodular or tubercular leprosy. These nodules grow on the skin, especially in the folds of the cheek, the nose, the lips and the forehead. The sufferer is disfigured as they grow larger and larger, ulcerating with a foul discharge. Death usually occurs within 9 years.
2. Then there is anaesthetic leprosy which attacks nerve trunks, causing sufferers to not feel any pain even when the affected body part is severely injured. Ulceration gradually occurs, with feet and hands eventually wasting away and falling off. Death usually occurs between 20 and 30 years.
3. The third is a mix of both nodular and anaesthetic leprosy.

But biblical leprosy is a broader term than the disease that we know today. The Hebrew *tsara'ath* included a variety of ailments such as any scaly skin blemish, including psoriasis. It was also used symbolically to refer to uncleanness or imperfections according to the Law. Sometimes it was associated with punishment or the consequences of sin. The symbolism even extended to blemishes on leather, or mold on the walls of a house.

Regardless of which type of leprosy Naaman had, for this warrior to still be held in high regard by the king was very unusual indeed. There is the old saying: "Don't judge a book by its cover." Anyone looking at Naaman could easily have shunned him, even condemned him as a sinner but they would have been very wrong indeed! How easy it is to judge others falsely. Sometimes we do it based on their physical appearance, other times on a wrong assumption of why they are doing something. The story of Naaman reminds us to look compassionately for the divine in each person.

And that's exactly what the young Israelite girl did. Despite being held captive by the Arameans, she said to Naaman's wife: *'If only my lord were with the prophet who is in Samaria! He would cure him of his leprosy.'*

## **Third Pearl of Wisdom: Verses 5-8**

The third pearl of wisdom comes from verses 5 to 8.

The King of Aram values Naaman very highly indeed. He sent him with ten talents of silver (about \$270,000 by weight), six thousand shekels of gold (about \$3million), and ten sets of garments (which were no doubt of fine quality).

He also expresses complete trust in the power of Israel's God through the prophet Elisha, to heal Naaman. His letter to the King of Israel read: “<sup>6</sup> *When this letter reaches you, know that I have sent to you my servant Naaman, that you may cure him of his leprosy.*’

There's another old saying: “Don't look a gift horse in the mouth”. Does anyone know where it comes from? It comes from the farming practice of evaluating the age of a horse by looking at its teeth. It means to never reject a gracious gift. But the King of Israel did just that! Despite the incredible gifts and the declaration of faith, this King is blinded by the past hatred and suspicion between the two states. Verse 7 tells that:

<sup>7</sup> *When the king of Israel read the letter, he tore his clothes and said, 'Am I God, to give death or life, that this man sends word to me to cure a man of his leprosy? Just look and see how he is trying to pick a quarrel with me.'*

How often, I wonder, do we fall into this trap? When, because of our past relationships, we assume the worst of someone even though they are actually trying to do a good thing. At those times we need a faithful believer to remind us that God is with us. We need to humbly take their advice and allow us to receive the gifts of God, whatever they may be. Fortunately for the King of Israel he had Elisha.

#### **Fourth Pearl of Wisdom- Verses 9-14**

The fourth pearl of wisdom is revealed in verses 9 to 14. You can just imagine Naaman rocking up at Elisha's house. Dressed in full armour on his majestic horse and chariot, surrounded by his loyal soldiers on their own chariots. Here is the proud warrior expecting to be treated with the utmost respect. But Elisha doesn't even greet him! Instead a messenger tells Naaman to: *Go, wash in the Jordan seven times, and your flesh shall be restored and you shall be clean.*

One more old saying is “Pride goeth before a fall.” Naaman is so full of his own and his country's self-importance that he is prepared to angrily forego the simple healing being offered to him by God through Elisha. It is a timely reminder for us all. When we look back on the history of this parish, it can be tempting to think that all that has been achieved over the years has been the result of our efforts. The vital fact to remember is that God has used us to achieve his purposes in each season. Naaman and Aram did not win the victories, God did. We did not build St Barnabas and St Michael's and All Angels, God did. When we put aside our own pride, then we can truly be guided by our Lord. He longs to show us the best way we can proclaim His gospel message of healing and salvation in our community. This is what Naaman did.

After his initial dummy spit, he ate his pride and listened to the wise advice of his servants. Through that humility, verse 14 tells us: *“his flesh was restored like the flesh of a young boy, and he was clean.”*

### **Fifth Pearl of Wisdom: Mark 1.40-42**

This restoration of Naaman is mirrored in our gospel reading and so for the fifth and final pearl of wisdom let us turn to Mark 1 verses 40 to 42.

Here we have another person with leprosy. Again we don't know what kind he had but we do know that as an identified leper he was largely ostracised from the rest of Jewish society. He had to live alone away from others, wear torn clothes and a bare head, put a covering upon his upper lip and wherever he went he had to call out; “Unclean! Unclean!” Little wonder that he begged to be healed and knelt before Jesus saying: *‘If you choose, you can make me clean.’*

Just like the King of Aram this person of low social status, expresses a profound trust in the power of God to heal. Except this time, that power is wielded not through the instrument of a prophet but through the Son of God himself. Verses 41 and 42 tell us: <sup>41</sup> *Moved with pity, Jesus stretched out his hand and touched him, and said to him, ‘I do choose. Be made clean!’* <sup>42</sup> *Immediately the leprosy left him, and he was made clean.”*

The wonderful pearl of wisdom given to us through this miraculous healing is, that Jesus chooses each one of us! No matter what our physical, emotional, psychological or spiritual state, HE CHOOSES US! He is longing for us to turn to him just like this leper did, because He has already made His decision to be with and for us always. His sacrifice on the cross, made his choice for us an eternal binding covenant. Praise God for his Son's choice!

Let me conclude in prayer.

Dear Lord Jesus, we give you thanks and praise for your compassionate love for each one of us. We thank you that we who are unworthy, have been chosen by you to join in God's mission to heal and restore His creation. AMEN