

Homily for People and Parishes

Bishop Cam Venables – Sunday 3rd July 2022, Pentecost 4

Readings: **2Kings 5:1-14**

Psalm 30

Galatians 6: (1-6) 7-18
17-24

Luke 10:1-12 (13-16)

When I was growing up the names of people and places described in Bible readings sounded exotic and strange. They were stories from very different contexts to my own and fascinating because of this. The Old Testament reading today (2Kings 5:1-14) is one of those, because there's a warrior called Naaman, who worked for the king of Aram, and there are the named Syrian rivers of Abana and Pharpar.

I have never met a man called Naaman but I have met many people in Toowoomba in recent years who have escaped persecution and violence in Syria. Christians who lived, worked and studied in Damascus, now call Toowoomba home. So, when I go to the supermarket, or a particular church, I now meet friends with Arabic names like Malek and Yousef... but, I have not yet met a Naaman!

In many ways the presence of Syrian friends in Toowoomba is a reminder that there has been conflict between and within many Middle Eastern countries for millennia, and perhaps this brings a helpful perspective to the way we read and hear biblical writing. For, somehow the people and place names become less exotic because we know people who have come from those places, and their names have become familiar.

Naaman was the Aramean army commander at that time, and he had successfully invaded and occupied part of Israel. 'Though he was a well-regarded leader in his country, he suffered from leprosy. It's interesting to note that in Aramean culture Naaman was not excluded from leadership or community because of this disease, whereas in Jewish culture he would have been stripped of his office, and would not have been allowed to live within the walls of a city.

A young slave girl from Israel, forcibly taken from her community, served Naaman's wife and through this role she observed that Naaman had leprosy. I

guess she was reasonably treated because she suggested to her mistress that there was a prophet in Israel who could heal to her husband. If she was being treated badly, it's likely that she would have said nothing and his suffering would not have been eased!

Naaman's wife passed on the news, and Naaman shared it with his boss, the king of Aram. The king of Aram then got a heap of money together and wrote a letter to the King of Israel asking if he could arrange for Naaman to be healed. Not unreasonably the king of Israel was shocked by this because he had no idea how somebody could be healed of leprosy and he concluded that the King of Aram just wanted an excuse to go to war.

It's interesting that the King of Israel was either unfamiliar with the healing ministry of Elisha, or he just didn't have confidence it would work. However, news of the request got to Elisha and he asked for Naaman to be sent to him so that people could see that God had the power to heal.

Naaman went, and because of his social and political status rightly expected a face to face meeting with the prophet Elisha. However, Elisha did not play ball and simply sent the instruction for Naaman to wash seven times in the river Jordan. I have seen photos of the river Jordan and it's not very impressive, so I understand why Naaman angrily jumped up and down affirming that he was going back to wash in some much better rivers in Syria! Happily for him, his servants advised Naaman to give it a go, and he was healed. I reckon Naaman returned thoughtfully to his home, wondering about the God who had restored his health.

There are some wonderful ironies in this story which leave us with important questions. The powerful King of Israel did not know about the healing power of God, or did not trust Elisha to deliver such healing. Rather, it was the captive Israeli slave girl who affirmed the potential source of healing. In a society that did not value women, or slaves, as much as men, and those who were not slaves, it is remarkable that the young girl's wisdom and insight is recorded at all. And, in a culture where the lives of servants depended on the good will of their masters... it seems amazing again that Naaman's servants challenged his arrogance and persuaded him to wash in the muddy waters of the Jordan as Elisha had directed.

So, for us there is the uncomfortable reminder that God's wisdom can come from those that society considers least. I wonder who the least are in Australia? I'm not saying that wisdom cannot come from political

and religious leaders, or from the leaders of business. But, I am saying we have to take seriously the insight that God's wisdom can often come from those we consider least.

Among those considered least in our society are the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island peoples of Australia. Between 2016 and 2017 there were twelve regional consultations across Australia with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island communities and this process was designed and led by aboriginal and Torres Strait Island leaders. Each of these consultations elected delegates to take ideas to a First Nations National Constitutional Convention, held at Uluru in May 2017.

This was the most extensive consultation of indigenous people in Australia ever, and the first time that such a large group from so many places had come together. On the 26th May 2017 they presented an affirmation to Australia that was titled, 'The Statement from the Heart'.

Within the wisdom of this short document there is the following affirmation, *'We seek constitutional reforms to empower our people, and take a rightful place in our own country. When we have power over our destiny, our children will flourish. They will walk in two worlds and their culture will be gift to their country.'*

I think it is a prophetic piece of writing that was rejected and ignored by the government of that time.

If Naaman's wife had not listened to her slave girl, her husband would not have been healed. And, if Naaman had not listened to his wife, or his servants, he would not have been healed.

I think there is a need for all of us to listen to this 'Statement from the Heart', with an openness to the possibility that God's Spirit has something there for us which will help to healing and new life to this fractured and multi-cultural nation we call home.

I wonder what you think?

Let's pray...

Living God, we give thanks for the ways that your Word challenges us to think about healing and listening to those we consider least. In your mercy we ask for the wisdom to listen well, and the courage to follow the leading of your Spirit. We pray in the name of the one who calls us to love, Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.