

Sermon on Naaman – 2 Kings 5:1ff

Sisters and brothers,
you must be familiar with the name of two well-known prophets:
Elijah and Elisha.

Elijah, the older of the two, who sought a successor, trained and formed Elisha,
and then died after a remarkable life lived for God and his people.

Elijah was called by God. Elijah was always seeking God.

And Elisha, his disciple in a way, had willingly followed in Elijah's footsteps to
carry on with what the older friend had started.

After Elijah had been taken to heaven in a mighty whirlwind, Elisha stayed back
alone, left with nothing more than Elijah's mantle in his hands... and a double
portion of Elijah's spirit. With this extraordinary gift, so Elisha discovered, he was
able to live out and pass on in God's name what Elijah had wanted him to.

With Elijah's mantle he could strike the waters of the Jordan and part them; and
with Elijah's spirit he could continue to work for peace and justice. And he did.

Weeks and months passed after Elijah's death, until one day Elisha heard the
unusual story of an unusual man: in those days everybody knew him.

Naaman – a well-known politician, a statesman, second person after the king,
minister of defence and foreign affairs, commander-in- chief of the king's army....
successful in warfare – especially against the Israelites...

Naaman had achieved much.

What he said and thought was heard and considered at the king's court and in the
king's council. He held an important position within the state and at court.

Naaman was a powerful man!

Everybody in the country knew him.

Strategically important parts of Israel had been conquered by him, defeated and
occupied by the great king of Damascus and his army.

Naaman was the commander-in-chief. And in Israel everybody feared him and was
terrified at the very mention of his name.

In Damascus people bowed before him, stood still when his chariot passed on his
way to the king's castle.

Parents would tell their children: "Look there, Naaman is called to the king again.
Our king needs Naaman's advice. He is the wisest among the ministers, and his
suggestions are the king's command. Remember this man!"

That is how people might have seen him, talked about him, watched him.

And nobody had the faintest idea that Naaman himself was in trouble. In great
trouble!

Only his wife – and of course the king knew of it...

It had started as a small alteration of the skin. Turned then into a simple rash, and ended up being one of the most awful diseases of their time.

Such white spots growing and spreading all over, put everybody at a loss – even if you were called Naaman and had all the power, lots of money and much to say...

Naaman suffered from leprosy.

And in those days there was no remedy against it.

Naaman could not be cured and would eventually die.

People thought he'd have a great life of wealth and prosperity and envied him.

Nobody knew what it looked like inside. Nobody had a clue how desperate, how isolated, how lonely the great man of power was.

When Naaman told the king, the king was of course both: shocked and worried.

He needed this man, couldn't possibly do without him if he died.

They tried what could be tried. Doctors and healers did their best, no medicine, no therapy was left out. But nothing, nothing managed to cure Naaman.

The king was willing to invest all there was: power, influence, money, connections...

But what if there is nothing left to invest in?

What if there is clearly and definitely no way out?

What if there is even danger for the others – the risk of also becoming sick?

At least the king did not abandon Naaman.

He stayed at his side and continued caring for him.

And so did Naaman's wife. She stood by him. She loved him, and found it almost unbearable to live with the awful knowledge of the terrible disease.

Even though nobody spoke about the illness, the servants and slaves in the courtlike, beautiful home of Naaman could sense the sadness and hopelessness that surrounded Naaman.

And one day, out of all people, a young slave girl who served Naaman's wife, said to her mistress: "If only Naaman was with the prophet who is in Samaria, the prophet could surely cure him..."

This girl had been brought as a captive from Israel. She was an enemy.

And Naaman was not just her enemy but her oppressor, the man responsible for keeping her a prisoner of war...

This girl must have had a big heart... full of sympathy and humanity in spite of what had been done to her.

And one day she found the courage to speak out what she'd thought for some time already.

"In my home country", she said, "he could be helped.

In my home country Elisha, God's chosen prophet cures and helps so many..."

Miss Nobody speaks to the commander-in-chief... about her home, her belief, her God.

Had Naaman and his wife not been so desperate, they wouldn't have listened. That's for sure.

How could the second man in state listen to the advice of a foreign slave girl? However, Naaman's hopelessness and despair must have already brought him to the point of being open and willing to try just anything...

Since he had nothing to lose, he was prepared to find out, what this Israelite prophet could do. Naaman went to his king, told him the story and found the king genuinely interested in restoring Naaman's health.

Naaman's health became a state affair. The king wrote a letter to the king of Israel. The great and powerful sovereign of Damascus ordered the king of Israel to cure his servant Naaman.

No polite request, no "could you please", but a firm and clear demand. That is how kings and bosses act. They solve what needs to be solved through the official channels.

With this letter to take with him, Naaman packed his things: servants, horses, chariots and lots of riches... bribe money, if you like.

...thinking, if it doesn't work by demands, it might still work with the money..." - silver, gold and garments..." the Old Testament tells us.

When Naaman arrived at the Israelite court with his horses and chariots and that special message from the king of Damascus, the king of Israel was immediately terrified.

This was going to bring along trouble...

He suspected at once that the king of Damascus was only seeking a reason to attack and fight against Israel again...

"I know", the Israelite king might have thought, "he is only looking for confrontation. Do they think I can heal people? And even if I could, or my God could, it wouldn't work with foreigners, would it?"

But if we don't send him back cured, this will certainly be our end... and the end of the people of Israel."

Faster than you would think, the rumour spread all over the place that the enemy was planning to attack again, and this time would surely raze Israel to the ground. The people were horrified. Nobody knew what to do...

...when a message came from Elisha, the prophet:

"Why have you torn your clothes, king of Israel? Let this foreigner come to me, that he may learn that there is a prophet in Israel."

Last hope for a helpless and fearful king.

What follows then in the Old Testament story of Elisha and Naaman, we have heard in the reading.

And again: it nearly wouldn't have worked, if Naaman's servants, just as the slave girl before, hadn't interfered.

"Father", they said to him, and begged him not to rush things at the wrong moment.

And maybe they had at least a slight idea, why Elisha had not even come out of the house but only gave his puzzling advice to wash in the Jordan...

Nobody before had experienced the water of the Jordan being special or expected it to be healing... Something else must have caused Elisha to suggest such treatment.

Maybe Elisha simply wanted to point out: I am not the doctor who does magic! And it is not a special medicine or cream that helps, it is somebody you wouldn't have thought of, who can restore your life: it is our God. The God of Israel...

Whether Naaman had grasped this or not,... he must have learned a lot by listening to slave girls and servants, travelling unimportant roads, trusting invisible prophets and washing in a comparatively small country stream.

It is the small things that changed his life... means and possibilities beyond power and world politics!

He had to be ready to see those, he usually saw only on the battlefield. He had to learn to listen to people he usually wouldn't even speak to. And he had to be open to do things he thought utterly ridiculous and undoable for somebody in his position.

"Are not Abana and Parpar, the rivers of Damascus, better than all the waters of Israel?"

It is just natural that Naaman was disturbed and irritated, and nearly walked off in anger...

"...if the prophet had commanded you to do something difficult, would you not have done it? How much more, when all he said to you was 'wash and be clean?'"

We don't know why, but that sentence made Naaman hold on a second, leaf through his majestic thoughts and discover what he hadn't come across in all his former life:

the simple thing will do... the unspectacular action in one of the smallest parts of the world...

Not gold, nor silver, nor garment, not horses, weapons, orders, not power and might would change his life, but the small gesture of washing...

Naaman could do this because he had already before somehow began to change his arrogant upper-class mind!

He washed in the Jordan, dived in seven times and felt a sense of relief and well-being which he hadn't experienced for ages.

”Like the flesh of a young boy”... - Naaman felt clean, fresh, young and full of energy again. Gone was the tiredness, the shame, the despair! New life was lying ahead, and he only had to live it out! ...a future after he'd already seen himself rotting away and dying...

Healing is something we all long for. Healing is something God longs for. The God who has created us, cares for his creation and yearns for goodness and wholeness, health, security and happiness. The Bible over and over again shows God leading people out of captivity, speaking to them through the prophets, healing their illnesses in Jesus, and in all that constantly seeking new ways to achieve wholeness and salvation.

Healing has got much to do with our bodies, our physical condition, but also with justice and peace.

Naaman doesn't simply experience the healing of his irritated skin, but the healing of his whole person.

Healing is not only about curing – it is about wholeness. Health is not about perfection, but about reconciliation.

After having washed in the Jordan Naaman had his eyes opened for those sides of life which till then he'd never taken in or found important: he could see the servants, listen to the peasants, appreciate the strange river, trust others and accept that it does not always have to be him, who is in control.

This is wholeness in our story.

The beginning of reconciliation between rich and poor, powerful and powerless, Damascus and Israel...!

And changed through the experience of healing Naaman could do something else, which is told in the passage that immediately follows the sermon text:

Naaman had already started walking away from Elisha and the Jordan, when something made him stop.

Moved, touched – whichever: he returned to the prophet's house, didn't wait in front of it until Elisha would come out and welcome him, but bowed down through the small door, went in to Elisha and offered him a present.

Was that meant to say thank you?

We don't really know...

...and there is something else that Naaman said to Elisha: “Now I know that there is no God in all the earth except in Israel...”

Elisha didn't accept money and thank you gifts. He pointed out that it wasn't him but God who'd worked the healing..., and that this is something that no human could or should ever pay for!

Healing is a gift of God; both: receiving healing and bringing it forth, experiencing it for ourselves, and helping to make it come true for others.

God longs for healing and gives healing: healing of broken bodies, painful memories, divided communities and nations, the healing of earth itself and of our relationship with it...

God calls us to the healing of so many..., people, stories, relationships, places, nature, politics! And justice is just as important as medicine; health of an individual as important as that of world politics.

They are closely linked. Not just in theology of the modern world, but also in Naaman's life.

With "new skin" and a changed philosophy of individual and community life and a new understanding of family and politics, home and state, Naaman travelled on, returned to the mighty Damascus where he had come from.

Things might have changed there – who knows...

Not only but certainly also, because Elisha gave the powerful foreigner who'd come for help, the most beautiful gift, believers can give to each other.

He looked Naaman in the eyes, full of friendliness... loving and encouraging...
...and spoke the words that sounded like music in Naaman's ears:

Go in peace.

Lech leshalom, in Hebrew...

God walks with you.

His peace is with you.

No matter what nation you come from and where you are heading for, God's peace will always be there.

These words are not only music in Naaman's ears.

They want to be music in our lives, too.

Go in peace.

Lech leshalom.

Take this peace. Bring it to the others. Pass it on.

Bring healing to the earth and its people, because God has loved and healed you first.

Amen.

Prayer

Let us pray a beautiful prayer
published by the Iona Community in Scotland:

Wash me clean, God.
Forget the sprinkling with gentle showers,
tip a bucket of your forgiveness over me,
tumble me in the waves of your mercy,
drench me in the sea of your love.

Then hold me,
wrap me round in the shawl of your grace,
warm me and name me,
and set my feet
on the road I must go.
Amen.