

St. Bride's Church of Scotland, Newtonmore

Rev. Catherine Buchan

BREAKING BARRIERS

3rd July 2016

2 Kings 5:1-14
Galatians 6:7-16

This morning I want to tell you a little of the story of Tomas Bisek. I was reminded of him and his story when I was thinking about the story of Naaman. Tomas is a pastor in the Czech Republic, in the Evangelical Church of the Czech Brethren, which is the same denomination that our friends in Libis and Kostelec are a part of. Indeed, their minister Mirek knows Tomas, although Tomas is a generation older than Mirek. Tomas' two daughters are known to me, so I already knew something of Tomas' story, but recently his biography was published in an English translation and I was able to read it.

Tomas grew up in what was then Czechoslovakia in post-war years, as the communist system of government was beginning to take hold. Nevertheless, the young Tomas felt called to be a pastor and eventually attained his goal, becoming the minister of a rural congregation. However, he and his wife Daniela felt that as followers of Jesus they could not be silent about the repressive regime which ran their country and they signed what was known as Charter 77, a document which talked of the need for people to have freedom. This made Tomas a person of interest to the police and the civil authorities, and time after time he was taken here and there for questioning. In the end his licence to be a minister was revoked by the state and he managed to find work as a forester. But the interest of the state did not cease. The family discovered that their home was bugged and their conversations listened to, and that those who came to visit were watched and followed. And all the time the authorities were suggesting that he should leave the country.

You may be wondering where the similarity to Naaman comes in, but wait for it! In the end, Tomas and Daniela agreed that for their children's sake – they had two girls and two boys – they should leave, and they were offered hospitality by the Church of Scotland who said they would find them a place to live and work for Tomas to do. As I was reading along in Tomas' book, vicariously suffering with him in his indecision, and the small, but annoyingly constant persecutions and privations he went through, I kept on looking forward to the chapter when in 1985 the family eventually left Czechoslovakia. Now everything would be all right, now the story would be happier.

But it wasn't! It was no happier at all. This was not because the family was not made welcome. Tomas makes it clear that their welcome to Cumbernauld, where they first settled, and where he worked as an assistant minister, could not have been warmer. The congregation had a house and had furnished it, they helped them with food and clothing and bikes for the children. But – it wasn't home. It wasn't where they wanted to be. Things were strange, and they only spoke a little English. The way people lived was alien to them, the food was odd (not just the haggis). The very church functioned

differently with different things expected of a minister than Tomas was used to. The family was grateful but for quite a long time they were miserable. They were not at home and the parents, at least, could not return.

And that is when I was reminded of Naaman. Naaman was an important man in his own land, with authority and rank. He knew how things worked in Syria, and he was near the top of the tree. And when he went to Israel to find the man who might heal him of his leprosy, things were alien to him. They were not as he expected. Elisha did not come out to see him – far less wave his hand over the leprous spot to magically cure it. Instead he sent a message telling him to wash seven times in the Jordan. Naaman was affronted and he said “Are not Abana and Pharpar, the rivers of Damascus, better than all the waters of Israel?” Things were getting better for Naaman, the prophet was trying to help him, but he was not happy. He was not at home, things were strange, and what is strange can never be as good as what is familiar.

To finish the story of Tomas for you, he and his family did eventually settle down in Scotland, and after a while in Cumbernauld moved to Govan where Tomas ministered. His children finished their education here and went on to university. His daughters married men who would become Church of Scotland ministers – one of whom is Scottish, and ministers in Stirling and the other of whom is also Czech and ministers in Ettrick and Yarrow in the Borders, and the two sons now live in England. But Tomas and Daniela have returned to what is now the Czech Republic and minister to what they have discovered to be a completely new Czech culture – that of the Westernised Czechs living in Prague housing estates. What Tomas says about that too is interesting to us as we seek to take forward our twinning with our Czech friends.

Tomas and Naaman say something important to us about people who are refugees, and that is that they don't want to come. People who are refugees – as opposed to economic migrants (although there is probably an element of what we see in Naaman in them as well) – do not want to be anywhere other than where they call home. It is just that home is not possible for them. Naaman cannot be cured of his leprosy at home, and to be a leper means that he cannot mix with people, he cannot do his job as commander of the army, he therefore will have to give up his home and his life-style. No one has a cure for leprosy. The depth of his despair can be seen in the way that he and his king clutch at the casual words of another refugee, the slave girl. She has been ripped from her home and what is familiar. It could be that her words are just the exile's plaintive cry that things were always better back at home. But Naaman and his King are prepared to risk that. It is the only possible cure on offer and they have to go for it.

They remind me very much of some of the stories we hear from those who have left Syria and invested all their savings to unscrupulous people-smugglers, and entrusted their beloved children to unsafe boats, because while they know there are terrible risks, there simply is no other course of action that they can see is open to them if they want to escape the extremity of their current situation. Desperation drives them, as it drove Tomas, as it drove Naaman. They do not come to Europe seeing it as a place of milk and honey – which was how the Israelites viewed their own land – but as a port in a storm.

The story of Naaman is about him overcoming mental barriers. He has to lower himself to ask for help. When he is too grand to accept the help in the way that it is offered, it is his servants, usually the last people he might listen to, who point out that it is worth giving it a try. And when he is cured he has to accept his cure as something which

cannot be bought, or paid for, he has to accept living in someone else's debt for the rest of his life.

Paul's whole letter to the church in Galatia, of which we have read excerpts in the past few weeks, is all about breaking down barriers – barriers of understanding which lead to barriers between people. The barrier which much of his letter focusses on, because it stands for so much, is that of Jewish circumcision. Even at the end of his letter, where, perhaps because he is cramming things into the end of his parchment, he is giving little short instructions, he returns to the theme of circumcision and how it means nothing at all compared to faith in Jesus and his work on the cross.

If we are Christians, we know that there is nothing we can trust in, nothing we can do which will save us other than the death and resurrection of Jesus. In Paul's day the issue was the Jewish Christians who thought that because they were circumcised they were superior. Since then the Church has gone through the centuries where it was though possible to gain merit by pilgrimage or penance or, when things were particularly corrupt, by buying indulgences. And now? Now we need to remember that it is not turning up at Church or helping in the community, or spending time on our knees in prayer which will make us holy in God's eyes. All of these are great things to do as a way to show gratitude to God and as ways to help us keep close to him. But nothing we can do pays for what Christ did.

Paul encourages us to work at living in the way God's Spirit intends for us and to be diligent in doing good to all, and especially to those who are of the household of faith – which is a lovely way of saying that Christians are all one family under God. But we shouldn't put up any more barriers within that family.

When I worked in Edinburgh in the 1980s I was a part of a congregation of the Scottish Episcopal Church, and I vividly remember on a visit back home to St. Andrews and to the Baptist church I grew up in, that one of the matriarchs of the congregation took me aside and said "We hear you are going to the Episcopal Church. I want you to know that I will pray for you." I knew what that meant! She was going to pray that I would not be corrupted and that I would come to my senses. She was making a barrier in her mind between "true Christians" and people who went to other churches. Earlier this year I met up with an old friend who currently attends a house church. She said to me "I tell them that actually I do think that there are some Christians in the Church of Scotland." I think I was meant to be pleased. But again there were mental barriers there between the "true Christians" and the rest, the people who just "go to church".

Naaman was a Syrian, not an Israelite, but God used his prophet to heal him. In Jesus there are no barriers. All of us are eternally and equally in Christ's debt. In Jesus all of us are equally part of the new creation which is what matters. And while that is a comfort and reassurance to us as we think of ourselves, it must also be a challenge to us in how we regard and speak of and treat others, who, expressing their faith in different ways, and coming from different customs and backgrounds, and even sometimes thinking of very different places as home, nevertheless are also children of God in Jesus. Amen.

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