



## **Your faith has made you well**

**A sermon by Revd Katherine Hedderly**

**Readings: 2 Kings 5.1-3, 7-15c; 2 Timothy 2.8-15; Luke 17.11-19**

In both stories of healing today, of Naaman the Syrian general and of the healing of the ten lepers, the instruction is to 'go'. What could be simpler? The prophet Elisha sends instruction to Naaman to go and wash in the Jordan as a cure for his leprosy. Jesus commands the ten lepers to go and show themselves to the priests, the ones who will restore them to their community.

It is Naaman who finds this simple instruction hard. From the start he has to revise his expectations of where real help will come from, and where real power lies. At first, in search of a cure he goes to the seat of power, to see the Israelite king in Samaria. But the king has no power to save him or to heal him. And so he responds to the prophet Elisha's invitation. God's ways are unexpected and go against the power structures of the day.

A man of prestige, Naaman arrives with his retinue expecting a grand reception, or at the very least a personal greeting from this prophet. Instead a servant brings a message, a simple instruction to wash in the river Jordan. Naaman is indignant. 'I thought for me he would surely come out'. Surely there must be more? What about some words of healing, a calling on God's power? He cannot imagine that God's grace can come so freely. His response is one of anger. He storms off in a rage. It is only when his servants encourage Naaman that he finally follows the simple instruction to 'go, wash and be clean'.

In contrast, the lepers in Luke's story simply go. And *on the way*, they are healed. Perhaps it is because of their powerlessness, that they come to Jesus unencumbered in their request for healing, unlike Naaman, and go in obedience when Jesus sends them. Their social status is in complete contrast to Naaman. They are outcasts, the ones who stand 'at a distance' because they are outside the camp, with no position or power. They obey and their lives are transformed. But only one turns back.

Go - sometimes that is simply all we are asked to do, to respond to an invitation, to receive God's love and gentle healing in our lives. Go where he sends us, letting go of our expectations of where his love and healing are to be found. It is not complicated.

Give thanks. Thanking God changes and transforms us. It is a wonderful place to start. One of the lepers on realising he has been healed turns back, praises God and thanks Jesus. He is the only one to realise that there is a relationship here, not just healing. He lays his life at Jesus' feet in response. He is doubly outcast, a leper and a despised Samaritan, perhaps the one most in need of this relationship. In healing him Jesus gives him back his dignity and treats him as an equal, restores his humanity and his place within the community. Perhaps for the first time, in turning back, he experiences his full worth, aware that God has made him all that he was meant to be. Naaman too, in that moment of healing, sees the truth of what God has done for him and who he really is in God's eyes, beyond the status and role and his position of power and influence. He is an outsider too, a foreigner and yet he too has been healed.

Do you remember watching Susan Boyle some years ago when she sang in an audition on Britain's Got Talent and how when she opened her mouth after a few moments people in the audience rose to their feet to cheer her on? A dumpy, middle-aged, rather eccentric woman, was singing like a star.

They simply couldn't equate what they saw with what they heard. It was overwhelming and she became an overnight sensation. It wasn't so much that she could sing so well but that she represented, in that moment, the desire of so many people for *their* full human dignity and worth to be recognised. For a moment this woman captured that desire and hope, they stopped laughing at her, and began to laugh with her, in delight.

We don't have to be suffering from a disease or illness to know what it means to feel like an outcast – that part of our life is outside the care and attention of others. What Jesus does in the encounter with the leper is show that he sees all of us; the parts that most obviously seem to need healing, and the experiences that set us outside our community, or social set, or family or church even, some sense in which we feel shunned or shamed. It may simply be an experience we are going through that we feel no one else can comprehend or understand that sets us apart. And for some that experience of being an outcast comes as a result of our world that creates outsiders because of conflict and poverty.

In these last two weeks we've seen the migrants from Somalia and Eritrea, and Syria caught up in the terrible tragedies near the Italian island of Lampedusa, having set sail from the turmoil of their own countries, seeking a better life in Europe. They are the ones outside the camp of our modern world now, fleeing violence, not welcome, stigmatised, with nowhere to call home. In need of dignity, a life restored, a welcome. It is into this situation and those that cause these events, that God's grace and healing and restoration and full human dignity and worth are most needed today. The whole of Jesus' ministry is for those on the outside, and those who are excluded.

There are several encounters in Luke's Gospel, like today's where we hear Jesus' words to the person healed, 'your faith has made you well or 'whole' – to the woman who anoints Jesus' feet in the house of Simon the Pharisee, the woman in the crowd who has suffered from haemorrhages, and to the blind man who begs. Like the man suffering from leprosy, each time it is someone who is considered to be an outcast, rejected from society. It is people like these that Jesus' message of freedom is for. Through faith in him, the least and the weakest will be strengthened and restored.

At the start of his ministry, as Jesus stands up in the synagogue in Nazareth, he recalls the acts of transformation and healing that Elijah and Elisha performed, that fell outside the normal realm of power and were for those considered to be outsiders. He refers to Elijah's care of the widow in Sidon experiencing famine and today's story of Elisha's healing of Naaman, the Syrian. They weren't part of the establishment of Israel, and yet God used them to show his power and truth. This is how his ministry will be. It will come not through conventional power and influence but in unexpected ways, and in the lives of those considered to be on the outside, who will be brought in. It will be good news for the poor, release for captives, healing and restoration in the power of the Spirit.

So what is this faith that restores us and makes us whole?

It involves recognising our need and turning to God with all of our heart. We stand with the lepers, who cry out in unison 'Lord, have mercy on us!' That simple prayer, often referred to as 'the Jesus Prayer,' is used by many people as a gateway into relationship with God in prayer. It puts us in right relationship with God, in need of his grace in our lives.

It's a call to obedience, to follow where Jesus calls us, to go where we are sent, and listen to those through whom God speaks to us, even if, like Naaman it will involve a change of mindset and a letting go of our own sense of self-importance. We have to be open to allow God be God to us, through unlikely people and situations.

It is allowing ourselves to let thankfulness well up within us and overwhelm us. And letting that thankfulness turn us – to an encounter with Jesus. To hear him speak to us... with words that restore us, that resonate with all that we were made and meant to be..

And then this faith sends us, in the Spirit. We are called to get up and go...

At the end of our service today we will be sent. 'Go in peace to love and serve the Lord'...

Knowing that we are loved, knowing that there is nothing that we are experiencing that is outside the care and healing power of God. Knowing that a thankful heart will restore our soul.