

As we read the Old Testament, we read a lot of about the great heroes of the bible – people like Moses, David, and Elijah. Great heroes of God. People who worked for God and showed God’s glory. Moses who led the nation of Israel out of slavery in Egypt, David who slew Goliath and Elijah who summoned fire from heaven to demonstrate the power of God over the power of Baal.

But as we read, we also discover that those great heroes were also all human. And because they were human, they were flawed: Moses who killed an Egyptian and hid the body, David who forced himself on Bathsheba – and then arranged to have Bathsheba’s husband killed – and Elijah, as we heard a couple of weeks ago, who had 450 prophets of Baal killed – and then panicked, ran and hid in a cave.

And as we look at these people we see God working through them, despite their shortcomings, despite their flaws. And we can reflect that if God can work through murderers and adulterers, then he can – and will – also work through each one of us. No matter what our shortcomings are, and no matter how serious – or how trivial – our sins may seem.

The hero that we encounter in today’s reading from 2 Kings is quite different from those others that I’ve mentioned, and he’s flawed too, but in quite a different way.

Verse 1 of today’s reading tells us, “Now Naaman was commander of the army of the king of Aram. He was a great man in the sight of his master and highly regarded, because through him the Lord had given victory to Aram. He was a valiant soldier...”

So the first thing to note is that Naaman is not an Israelite – he’s from Aram, a Syrian. He’s not a follower of God. He’s a commander in the king of Aram’s army (generally an enemy of the nation of Israel) – and the king regards him highly. He was successful – as a soldier and as a leader. It’s probably fair to say that he would be the model commander – the person all the men of Aram would want to be like and all the women of Aram would want to be with.

But Naaman had a flaw. And wasn’t a moral flaw: he wasn’t a murderer or an adulterer or a cheat or an embezzler (at least, not that we know of). His flaw was physical, incurable, would be disabling, carried a great social stigma, and would ultimately lead to his death.

Naaman had leprosy. The Hebrew word that is usually translated as leprosy, referred to many skin diseases, not just what we know today as leprosy, but they were all dreaded. Having leprosy meant you were unclean – unclean socially and unclean spiritually. If you had leprosy, you were excluded, you were literally outcast.

And that exclusion, that separation, has persisted into modern times.

And here we have Naaman, the model Syrian soldier, stricken with leprosy. The Golden Boy of Aram, suffering from a dreaded skin disease. He may have been able to hide the effects at

first, but soon enough it would have become obvious. Leprosy was a death sentence for Namaan. A slow and painful and lonely death sentence.

It seems that Namaan's leprosy was not a secret, and those around him, including the king realised what was happening and cared deeply for what was happening to Namaan.

Namaan's wife had a slave girl who had been taken captive from Israel, and she realised that the power of God (and remember that this is her God, the God of Israel; not Namaan's God), would be able to save him. And she told Namaan's wife that Namaan should go to the prophet in Samaria to be cured.

Hearing this suggestion, Namaan went to the king and told him what the girl had said. And here you see how highly the king regarded Namaan – he said “By all means, go”, and gave him a letter of introduction to the king of Israel, which no doubt would have told the King how important Namaan was.

Namaan left for Israel, taking with him a huge fortune – ten talents of silver, six thousand shekels of gold and ten sets of clothing (that's around 340kg of silver and 70kg of gold).

So Namaan made the journey to Israel, and gave his letter to the king.

The king read the letter and was horrified. He might have been the most powerful man in Israel, but he didn't have the power to cure leprosy. He tore his robes in anguish. He wondered if the King of Aram was trying to pick a fight with him – by giving him an impossible task.

Fortunately the prophet Elisha heard the news of Namaan's arrival, and told the king to send Namaan to Elisha. After all, that was what the slave girl had originally suggested – go and see the prophet. And it was possibly Namaan or the king's pride that had taken Namaan first to the king, although – to be fair to Namaan – it just might have been the proper diplomatic protocol.

So you can imagine the scene – Namaan, with his caravan of treasure – horses and chariots – leaving the royal palace and going to Elisha's house. We don't know what the house was like, but I like to think of it as a modest little house – in great contrast to the palace and to the mass of Namaan's followers who stood outside.

But even with this great man arriving, even with his treasure to pay for his healing, and even having been sent to him by the king of Israel himself, Elisha didn't come out to greet Namaan – or even invite him in.

He sends a messenger out. “Go, wash yourself seven times in the Jordan, and your flesh will be restored and you will be cleansed.” (5:10)

Having travelled from Syria to Israel, and traipsed about the countryside to Elisha's house, Naaman is apparently fobbed off – “go wash yourself in the local river...”

I think Naaman's reaction is not unreasonable – from verse 11 “But Naaman went away angry and said, “I thought that he would surely come out to me and stand and call on the name of the Lord his God, wave his hand over the spot and cure me of my leprosy.””

Leprosy cured with the wave of a hand: That's the sort of thing you'd expect. Like the fire that Elijah summoned from heaven. Powerful stuff, but instead, he's told to go and wash in a muddy stream. Certainly, Naaman didn't think much of the Jordan – “Are not Abana and Pharpar, the rivers of Damascus, better than all the waters of Israel? Couldn't I wash in them and be cleansed?” (5:12)

We read that Naaman turned and went off in a rage. A wasted journey. A future which would see him succumbing slowly and painfully to leprosy. A future that would see him outcast and alone.

Fortunately for him, though, his servants ran after him and said “My father, if the prophet had told you to do some great thing, would you not have done it? How much more, then, when he tells you, ‘Wash and be cleansed’!” (5:13).

We so often in our lives want the dramatic. We don't think the little things count. We want the big, flashy, shows of power, rather than the quiet show of love.

But we should also think about how Elijah encountered God on Mount Horeb. There was a mighty wind, but God was not in the wind. And then an earthquake, but God was not in the earthquake. And then a fire, but God was not in the fire. Instead, God came to Elijah in a gentle whisper. In a still small voice.

If Elisha had told Naaman to sacrifice fifty sheep, he would have done it without hesitation. If Elisha had told Naaman to sacrifice one hundred bulls, he would have done it straight away.

But Elisha told him to bathe in the Jordan. He did... but he wouldn't have done it, except for his servants pointing out his hypocrisy in being prepared to do the grand things, but not the humble.

Naaman went down to the river and humbled himself. The glorious hero of Syria, dipping himself in this muddy stream in Israel.

Once. Twice. Three times.

I can imagine Naaman looking down at himself and seeing no change. Surely, there'd be some improvement? Some indication that healing was taking place.

Four times. Five times.

And still nothing. Maybe he thought Elisha was just making fun of him – watch me make this great commander make a fool of himself in front of his servants.

Six times.

Nothing.

But then, on the seventh dipping. He was healed. The leprosy, the dreaded skin disease, was gone. His flesh, we read, was restored and became clean like that of a young boy.

Hallelujah! Praise God.

So he returned to Elisha, with his whole retinue, and made a staggering declaration: “Now I know that there is no God in all the world except in Israel.”

Naaman was cured and Naaman came to know God through the power of that miraculous - though quite humble - healing.

It's the same with us and Jesus. Jesus who lived and died for us. Jesus who offers us everlasting life, and asks us to put our faith in him. He asks us to be humble, just as he was humble. Jesus wasn't the saviour the people were expecting – but he was the saviour the people needed... and the saviour we still need today.

What a great story the story of Naaman is. And we can all relate to it, I think. The struggles of Naaman. No matter how good things are – and they were very good for Naaman – there are still problems and flaws. Maybe not something as dramatic as leprosy, but whatever we're dealing with in our lives. Personally, in our families, in our churches and indeed in our country and certainly in our world.

If we can only put our pride aside, and listen to God, to humble ourselves as Naaman did, and respond to what God has done for us, we can be changed. And if we can be changed, our families can be changed. And our churches can be changed. And our country can be changed. And sure enough our world can be changed too.

In the story we've read today, Naaman is a hero by the world's definition. He's a great man. He's highly regarded. He's victorious, and he's valiant.

He's a hero.

But he's not the hero of this story.

And Elisha is a prophet of God.

But neither is he the hero of this story.

And neither is the king of Aram nor the king of Israel.

Because the heroes of this story are servants. A slave girl who told Naaman's wife that Naaman should go to the prophet, the messenger who took the message of healing from Elisha to Naaman, and of course the servants who pointed out Naaman's hypocrisy and encouraged him to do what Elisha had instructed.

None of these servants are mentioned by name. None feature anywhere else in the scriptures. At one level they are just minor characters in the story of God and his people.

But they are also critically important. Go see the prophet. Go wash in the Jordan. Go back and humble yourself. They're critically important – just like Moses, David and Elijah. But they're so minor, that we don't know their names, let alone whatever their flaws were.

We sometimes think that we can't do things for God because we're flawed. But probably more often we think we can't do things for God because we're unimportant. We're not significant. Our congregation is only small and we're all getting older.

Or our denomination is in decline, and sometimes it seems there's not much that we can do beside "circle the wagons", wind back ministries, and maybe even give up a smaller congregation or two to keep the rest of us going.

Our efforts to share our faith and to support our church might seem insignificant, but they are also critically important.

Like Naaman's wife's servant girl, to encourage people to seek God.

Like Elisha's messenger, to carry the good news to those who seek it.

And like Naaman's servants, to encourage people to put aside pride and to come before God humbly, and encourage them to trust God.

In all these things we are empowered by the Holy Spirit who dwells within us.

The servants in the story of Naaman are the saints of God.

They carried a message of hope and a message of God's grace.

They were the unexpected heroes of the story.

And we, too, as we trust in God, can be unexpected heroes too.

To the glory of God.

Amen