

2 Kings 5: 1 - 14**Luke 10: 1- 11, 16 - 20****THE STRANGE WAYS OF GOD**

Introduction This morning's Old Testament reading is about a leper and leprosy. Can we laugh about leprosy? Young people could probably tell us one or two leprosy jokes; they seem to do the rounds every now and then. Like many other things too terrible to contemplate, we have to joke about it! And I have to say there is humour in both the stories we heard read today. It's not Comedy Festival material, it is more the humour of irony, but Monty Python could make something of it I'm sure.

1. The Story of Naaman the Syrian: The first thing to notice in this highly ironic story is that Naaman is a Syrian general. He is the King of Syria's confidante, the Prime Minister and a man of war, a man who has shed the blood of many an Israelite. Is it a surprise to us that the man of blood is not excluded from the love of God? Why God chooses to heal this man of war is part of the mystery of God's will. We cannot even pretend to know.

Naaman should have been ostracised because of his disease. Even though the disease is called leprosy in our translations is not what we know today as Hansen's Disease. Archaeological evidence suggests that Hansen's Disease was unknown in ancient Palestine and even in New Testament times. The word *lepra* in Hebrew and Greek describes a broad range of skin and fungal infections that usually meant the person was cut off from normal social contact. Much like our experience of Covid today. But Naaman's king stands by his man and when he hears of the possibility of a cure, he pursues it by exercising his power. What does a King do but write a letter to the King of the land where Elisha is living? He turns to a politician to solve the problem.

Now the King of Israel (a vassal of Syria) when he receives the letter, acts just like a politician. He interprets the letter politically. It is strange, but perhaps not surprising, that the King of Israel shows the least faith and the least confidence in the prophet of God. He knows Elisha, he has already had dealings with him. But all the same he does not believe him or in the God he represents. He sees the letter from Syria as a threat – a pretext for war. He thinks only in terms of the structures of power and the possibilities of politics. Again, we see the fallacy of any system that thinks that it is only politics and power that can achieve the goals of nations. But that is not how God acts.

Naaman also thinks that political power and prestige counts for everything. He is a general - he is entitled. When he appears at the door of Elisha's tent, the

man of God does not even come out. He sends a messenger - a lackey - to this important foreign general and gives him the message to go and wash seven times in the Jordan. Naaman is incensed and refuses to do what Elisha has said. (The supreme insult - the general has not even been received!) Are there not better rivers in Syria than the muddy Jordan?

2. The Strange ways of God There are some things for us to notice and learn in this story about the ways of God with us. Notice the modest and humble means by which God chooses to achieve God's purpose in this looming international incident.

First there is a little girl from the land of Israel who was a slave in Naaman's house. (Possibly Naaman himself had taken her captive during one of his raids into Israel.) She is the first of God's instruments. It would be hard to find a more unlikely starting-point for an act of God; or one of less significance from a human point of view - a mere girl, a child slave.

Yet the words of this girl carry weight. These words that simply express her faith. She speaks the truth. She says that Elisha, the prophet of the one true God could heal the General.

But once she has given her testimony and witnessed to her faith, she disappears from the story. There is no further reference to her; her name is not recorded. But she has borne her witness to the Word of God and this is the decisive event in her life both for herself and for others. In contrast to the power of Naaman, God uses the weakness of a little girl to accomplish his purpose.

And again, after Naaman has proudly refused to do what Elisha asked and is on the verge of walking out, it is his slaves who convince him to do what is necessary for his healing. God accomplishes his purpose through the simple arguments of Naaman's servants who are not even believers.

And what is Naaman asked to do? Go and wash in the Jordan. Christians have long seen in this washing the act of baptism. Naaman is plunged into the water not three times but seven times, and rises up out of it a renewed human being. Cleansed and made whole - restored to his full humanity and into his place in the human community through the witness of ordinary people.

Mission in Jesus' Way: When we turn to the Gospel reading for today, we see the same strange divine methodology at work. Jesus sends his disciples out to bear witness to the coming of the Kingdom in Jesus.

The Jehovah's Witnesses take this passage literally and send out their witnesses two by two knocking on doors and telling people about their view of Jesus. But most churches today do not send out itinerant preachers in pairs who go from town to town, staying in one house for a short period before moving to another town. But this text does have some mission insights for us today, though it needs a theological, rather than a literal, reading of the text.

First, Luke reminds us that it is the Lord's mission first, last and always. Because we are called by Jesus to share in **his** mission in the world, a key question is not "What is our mission?" How much time and energy has the church spent on asking that question as it seeks to find its place in the post-modern world and justify its existence according to the criteria of modern commerce or sociology.

The key question for us as those sent by Jesus is: What is Christ's mission in the world? How is the Lord empowering and sending us to participate in that larger mission? We have to look beyond the church to find that answer because Jesus' mission was to the poor, the lost and the sinner and not to those who sought the comfort of religion. These readings tell us that God's Spirit works in many different ways and through the most unlikely people. We have the task of discerning where the Spirit is at work through the United Nations agencies, Red Cross and Red Crescent and all the other secular agencies whom God uses to achieve God's purposes.

Second, because it is Jesus' mission does not guarantee success. There were both positive and negative responses to the disciples' message that in Jesus the kingdom of God had come near. The importance and value of our witness does not depend on the quantifiable rates of success/failure but on faithfulness to Jesus and his saving mission. In an age when the church seems to be seduced by numbers and results, we need to hear Luke's message that this mission marches to the sound of a different drum and values things other than numbers and quantifiable success.

Third, this is a mission of obedience to, and dependence on, Christ. Those of us who have a tendency to think that the church belongs to us and should reflect our priorities, especially those of us who are ordained or have leadership positions in the church, we must remember again and again that we are not the ones in charge. Therefore, we hold even our most cherished convictions with a certain humility, as we listen for the Spirit in the company of God's people.

Because we are servants of another, we do not always know where our obedience will take us. But we do not go by ourselves, but in community (here represented by the 2x2). We may not always be able to provide for ourselves but are somewhat dependent on the kindness of strangers who turn out to be children of peace. (vv 5-6).

And yes, we are sent out like lambs in the midst of wolves. That is, we engage our fellows with the news of the kingdom without defensiveness or subterfuge and we certainly do not apply the tactics of the wolf in the pursuit of the mission of Jesus. So, those sent by Jesus do not seek power or status in their mission. The joy comes from participation in Jesus' mission.

What a challenge for those of us who are seeking the way ahead for the contemporary church. In all our searching for the identity and mission of the church today, let us not lose our way in the pursuit of systems and programs, success or worse, mere survival. To do so would be to neglect the foundations that are given to us by the Lord of the church in Scripture and in scholarship.

Conclusion: Paragraph three of the Basis of Union reminds us: ***On the way Christ feeds his church with Word and Sacraments, and she has the gift of the Spirit in order that she may not lose the way.***

Today, we claim that promise as we gather round this table; we are fewer than the seventy-two who originally were gathered by Jesus and sent on the way ahead of where he was going. But fed by Word and sacrament, we too will go like lambs in the midst of wolves, to tell those we lodge with, that we have seen the kingdom of God in Jesus Christ.

And through those testimonies Jesus does his own strange work in the world. By God's grace, through our faithfulness to Jesus' mission, the world will be won in God's good time.