

## **SERMON FOR SUNDAY BEFORE LENT FOR STEEPLE LANGFORD (at Little Langford): 11-02-24 (based on 2 Kings 5:1-14 and Mark 1:40-45)**

May the words of my mouth and the thoughts of all our hearts be now and always acceptable in your sight, O God our strength and our Redeemer. Amen

### **Faith, expectation and change**

Sometimes, life throws up situations that turn our expectations upside down - they may lead to positive change..... or simply make us smile. It might be words of kindness from a person we felt had been stand-offish; or a role reversal in the form of assistance from someone who had hitherto been the recipient of our help. The positive impact of these experiences gives them the power to change attitudes, and we can see that happening in our Old Testament and Gospel readings. They're both about healing a skin disease, and although referred to as leprosy, this was a word applied to a range of skin diseases. Significant in these stories is the strength of faith involved in the healing process, with its unexpected impact on the people involved.

Let's turn first to the passage from 2 Kings and its context. There is military rivalry between Israel and the Arameans - at this point in the conflict, the Arameans have the upper hand. Naaman is a successful and high ranking military officer, with a debilitating skin disease. The unnamed servant girl is a captured Israelite, in the service of Naaman's wife. We might expect the girl to feel bitter about her situation, but instead she tells her mistress about a prophet in her home country, who could cure Naaman. Naaman informs the King, who sends a letter and high value gifts to his Israelite counterpart, demanding a cure. The king of Israel thought he was being asked personally to heal the man, and saw it as a deliberate attempt to pick a fight by asking the impossible. Fortunately, the prophet Elisha heard of this and sent a message that Naaman be brought to him.

There's a David and Goliath motif going on here in the way the writer pits the power of Naaman against the limited strength of those who serve him. Naaman's illness has already marked him as vulnerable, and we are shown a man, used to giving orders to others, now on the receiving end of instructions - and he doesn't like it. He has come to Israel with all the trappings of power, but is received not by the king, nor even by the prophet with the healing power, but by a mere messenger, who instructs him to bathe in the Jordan. Naaman had been expecting an elaborate spectacle and cannot see how the Jordan could be more effective than the rivers of his own country. The final

blow to his dignity comes with the persuasive words of his own servants. Wealth couldn't buy his cure - it was to be the faith of a servant girl and a dose of humility that brought about his own belief in the power of a foreign God. It's a story about the healing and transformation of an influential man through the actions of humble folk with no authority or influence, other than their faith. Such situations would be repeated years later in Christ's own life and ministry, as we shall see when when we turn to the passage from Mark.

Here, still early in his ministry, we find Jesus working miracles. Having already gained a reputation for exorcising demons and curing illness, Jesus has been free to spread his message in public places and successful in drawing crowds. All that is about to change. One day, a leper approaches Jesus, who reacts with pity, according to our translation - but others use 'with anger', which is more likely to be the original even though it doesn't fit our image of a compassionate Christ. So why the anger? Possibly because Jesus knew immediately that healing this particular disease would bring him into conflict with the authorities - by touching him, Jesus would, according to Jewish Law, make himself unclean. It also explains why Jesus wanted the healing to be kept quiet, apart from telling the priest, who was required by Law to certify the cure.

And what about the leper, shunned by society and deemed unclean? He was risking further rejection, yet his faith was stronger than that fear. He uses an interesting choice of words in his request: "if you choose". There is recognition here of God's will at work through Christ. We note, too, the humility of the leper, as he kneels before Jesus. The symbolism in the scene is so fitting on this Sunday before Lent, when we, too, will humbly approach Christ to repent of our wrongdoings and ask for forgiveness. But why did this humble man then disobey Jesus and broadcast the good news of his cure? I don't see this as wilful disobedience, but as an irrepressible response to a miracle, along with his not understanding what lay behind Jesus' request for secrecy. This particular cure, in contravention of the Law, could lead to civil unrest among those seeing it as a sign that the Messiah had arrived, the one they believed would overthrow their Roman oppressors. It would certainly explain why Jesus was concerned to keep a low profile, and his subsequent decision to retreat to the wilderness. It's here that we see the role reversal. We began with someone ostracised by his leprosy and unable to mix freely, meeting a man who, up till then had had the freedom to roam at will. Once healed, the leper is then free to go where he wants. But Jesus is no longer

comfortable about openly proclaiming his message in public places and so withdraws to the wilderness, effectively restricting his own freedom.

We are confronted in both readings by the unexpected, a reversal of roles that presages Christ's own approach to ministry and kingship. The one sees a captured slave and a couple of servants advising and changing the mind of an army commander, which in turn will come to have a positive impact on the relationship between two warring countries. The other forces the preacher, teacher and healer Jesus to retreat from public spaces - it was not, however, as negative as it sounds. Jesus continued his teaching and miracles, drawing crowds to him rather than going to the people. And all the while, viewing this 2000 years later, we are aware of role reversals that continued to define his ministry and his life: for example, his mixing with outcasts and urging humility; his washing the feet of his disciples; and as the King of the Jews, crucified like a criminal - to name but a few. He was always turning the tables (and not just in the Temple!) and encouraging us to rethink our lives. With Lent fast approaching, it's perhaps a good time to embrace the unexpected and reflect on how the Lord continues, through the faithful, to bring about change. It's a time, not only to think about the changes we ourselves need to make, but perhaps also about how we can transform the lives of others....

In the name of Christ, amen.