



Season of Lay Ministries

Third Sunday after Trinity

3 July

Preaching notes

Readings

2 Kings 5: 1-14

Psalm 30

Galatians 6: 1-16

Luke 10: 1-11, 16-20

We are perhaps more familiar with the stories of Jesus healing lepers in the New Testament than the story of the healing of Naaman in the Old Testament. Leprosy or Hansen's disease does exist today but it is rare and, with early diagnosis and treatment, can be cured. The lengths to which Naaman goes to seek a cure must seem odd to us today. Perhaps the closest we can get to the fear felt by Naaman and others is our reaction to COVID-19.

The story of Naaman is not only about the healing of the Aramean general and Gentile and his conversion to a new-found faith in God; it is also about those who helped him, people who could easily have been overlooked in the hierarchy of the day but without whom Naaman would have continued to live the life of a leper, banished to the sidelines.

It all begins with Naaman. Naaman, this great commander who is greatly respected by his master the king, has fallen victim to leprosy, a horrible incurable skin disease which didn't confine itself to the poor and destitute and ultimately would lead to death. Naaman wants to be cured but initially is only willing to accept the "doing for" and not the "doing with". His wife, however, is worried not only about her husband's future but her own too. Women at this time existed mostly in relation to men. If Naaman died she would have no legal standing. By reaching out to her young servant, who had a faith in the true God and knew of a prophet from her homeland in Samaria who could help, there was hope.

But there are other characters here, people who were not powerful or important but who are essential

to the story. The young servant girl was an unwilling missionary, taken captive from Israel and brought back to Syria. God allowed the tragedy of her captivity to accomplish a greater good. She cared enough about her mistress to listen and speak out; to have faith that the healing powers of Elisha would rid Naaman of his leprosy. Elisha's servant is the messenger and go-between, humbling for Naaman who would have expected to speak directly to Elisha.

Naaman's servants intervene to persuade their master to do what the prophet tells him to do, bold enough to give him the good advice he needs to hear. All are the listening ears, the signposters, the people prepared to speak out and make Naaman realise that, to be healed, he needs to change.

Naaman's master, the king of Aram, understands and values Naaman but misunderstands the request made because Naaman himself has not listened to the servant girl, only hearing what he wants to hear. The king sends Naaman to his former enemy, the king of Israel, who thinks it is all a trick. Naaman takes with him ten talents of silver, a small fortune, showing his desperation. The king of Israel reads the letter and is upset – it is not within his power to heal Naaman's leprosy and he has no relationship with the prophet Elisha. He knows he is not God, and rips his clothes. Signposting gone wrong through lack of understanding on Naaman's part. Who would ask a plumber to mend a broken leg when it is a doctor who is needed?

Finally, we have Elisha, the prophet. The one with the power to heal. Obedient to God's call. A humble man who loves the people of Israel and is faithful in a lifelong ministry. He believes and trusts in God and, if God asks, is prepared to help a Gentile. He is prepared to reach out to the king of Israel and Naaman. However, Naaman, expecting a quick fix, is angry when he doesn't get one: Elisha didn't even deign to come in person and speak to him, sending instead a message via his servant for Naaman to go and wash himself in the murky waters of the Jordan seven times! Naaman didn't understand that the

healing would come from God rather than Elisha. Ultimately, only Naaman can make the decision to step into the river Jordan. His servants persuade him to think again and, as he does so, the waters wash him clean of leprosy; he is a new man with a new-found faith in God.

As a Southwark Pastoral Auxiliary, I can't help but read this with pastoral ministry in mind.

Pastoral work is about listening, coming alongside and "being with" someone as they go through a difficult period in their life such as bereavement, loss, illness, or loneliness. Sam Wells, in his book *Incarnational Ministry*, talks of the ministry of "being with" and uses the story of Agnes and Tóti in the book *Burial Rites* by Hannah Kent, wherein a young priest is called upon to support a young woman as she stands trial and is ultimately hanged. It is a very moving account of injustice in 19th-century Iceland, but also of how the young priest, in listening to the girl's story, changes his initial perception of her.

Pastoral ministry is not about doing everything for the people you come alongside, but helping them to find the means to meet the challenges and do things themselves; helping to heal the wounds of bereavement, loneliness and loss in order to make a life worth living.

In the healing of Naaman we see the young girl who is "being with" her mistress, listening to her worries about Naaman and her own future should her husband die. She is able to offer support. We see Elisha's loyal and trusted servant, someone who has the ear of his master, relay the instructions to Naaman to go and wash in the Jordan. Then Naaman's own servants, who know their master well, quietly prod Naaman to follow Elisha's command by putting a question to him to help him see sense. In their own ways all these minor characters have engaged in "being with" or coming alongside.

They are used by the God who heals and cares not only for his own, the Israelites, but for others, people who worship other gods.

In this Diocese there are many who walk alongside and minister to people who are different [give an example from your own congregation if possible]. There are many who minister not just to those within the parish they serve, but out in the community too; in institutions such as hospitals and prisons, in food banks, after-school clubs and fire stations to name but a few. Theirs is a ministry of coming alongside,

listening, "being with" rather than "for". They are the eyes and the ears of many congregations.

As Jesus told his disciples, sometimes pastoral ministry gets the door slammed in the face. But that initial suggestion of support in the encounter may well have sown the seed. Being able to come alongside someone and "be with" them when they need it most is humbling.

However, as Jesus said to the 70: "The harvest is plentiful, but the labourers are few" (Luke 10:2). In this Season of Lay Ministries we invite you to think about whether God is calling you to walk alongside others, enabling them to be healed, or to any other form of lay ministry.

Wendy Stephens
Diocesan SPA

Prayer

Lord Jesus,
help us as we minister in your name
to be ready for those who ask us questions,
to answer with honesty,
to expose our frailty,
to be honest about our doubts
but also to draw them into that strong
community of faith
you form in resurrection light.
Amen.

The Very Revd Andrew Nunn
Dean of Southwark

Suggested hymns

Be still, for the presence of the Lord
Take my life and let it be
I the Lord of sea and sky (Here I am Lord)
Make me a channel of your peace
Guide me, O thou great Redeemer
O Jesus, I have promised
Will you come and follow me (The Summons)