

Epiphany 6 Sunday 11th February 2024

'Trust and Obey'

by

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Introduction

The sixth Sunday after Epiphany is when we meditate on its theme of 'Trust and Obey'. Trust is still a socially acceptable word today even though we might be sceptical about the motives of some people who say, "Trust me!" Obedience seems to be different except in organisations such as the defence forces and emergency services where trust and obedience can be literally a matter of life or death.

We may desire to trust God, particularly when those close to us cannot help us or have somehow failed us. However, we won't see the truth, have the evidence, of God's trustworthiness and faithfulness, unless we are obedient to his word to us in Jesus of Nazareth.

Our readings from II Kings and the gospel of Mark, each about the healing of a leper, give us an idea of what trust and obedience may be like in our relationship with God, in the Kingdom of God. Keeping this in mind as we approach our Lenten fast is not a bad way of preparing ourselves. We enter our six weeks of Lent this Wednesday: Ash Wednesday. After the 10.30 am eucharist this morning, we can witness the tradition of burning the palm crosses of the previous year to produce ashes. Those ashes will mark our foreheads as the cross is traced and we hear the words: 'Remember that thou art dust, and unto dust thou shalt return'.

Those words sound confronting: do I really want to remember my organic frailty and mortality? Perhaps I should start a crowdfund so I can shoot off into timeless space. I could float around while life on the blue planet goes on.

Or shall I trust Jesus' promises and obey his commands?

II Kings 5:1-14

In our first reading, we heard the story of the great prophet Elisha healing Naaman, the warrior and mighty commander of the army of the king of Aram, which today includes Syria. Coincidentally, there was a newspaper report last week of Israeli doctors working to save the life of a member of the Hamas leader, Ismail Haniyeh's family, a baby.

Naaman, first trusts the word of an unnamed girl, his wife's maid. The girl had been captured on one of his raids into Israel, the northern kingdom, which centuries later became the Samaria known to Jesus. Naaman had an

irritating and embarrassing skin condition (leuke), not leprosy (lepre) as such. The girl-slave spoke to Naaman's wife the words, which pointed him in the direction of his healing. 'If only my lord were with the prophet who is in Samaria! He would cure him of his leprosy', and her mistress told her husband.

Since he had to cross into another country, one that he'd raided many times, let's not forget, Naaman went to his king in accordance with the diplomatic relations of the times. He was so important that his king sent a letter to the king of Israel. Naaman himself took gifts, which showed his immense wealth and power. When, after the interchange between the king of Israel and Elisha, Naaman came to Elisha's house, he arrived with his retinue of horses and chariots - imagine the pomp and the noise.

What do we know about Naaman's spiritual and physical state from all that? He is proud, and though strong, he is unwell. Yes, he has chosen to come to the prophet of the God of Israel, but his expectations of what's to happen at his healing are based on what he knows and his own power in his world: you make offerings to your god when you want a blessing, such as healing. That's the deal, the transaction, just like the contract between a customer and a tradesman, a client and a professional, or the taxpayer and the government!

Well, Elisha didn't go out to greet Naaman but let him wait at his gate and sent a messenger to him, saying, "Go, wash in the Jordan seven times, and your flesh shall be restored, and you shall be clean."

Naaman is up in arms! Even more than those today who want pills, potions and possibly complex surgery when healthy food, exercise and good-bye to noxious indulgences would do more. "I thought that **for me** he would surely come out and stand and call on the name of the Lord his God, and would wave his hand over the spot, and cure the leprosy!"

Here, he is the great 'I am', isn't he? But what is the name of God? Yahweh: I am who I am, and I will be who I will be. So what does the story tell us at this point? In his pride, Naaman is making himself above God. He has come all that way, and one thing stops him from recovering his health. Stubborn pride. His sense of his own importance.

God doesn't necessarily speak or guide us as we sometimes expect or demand. God comes to those who wait and are empty. Some empty themselves, others have been emptied by life and circumstances. When we're empty, we're ready to receive the surprising, creative word.

Naaman had wise servants, though, again the unnamed, like the unnamed in our own lives who have guided us spiritually, and he did listen.

In his desire for physical healing, Naaman the proud, crossed over that barrier and that of his prejudice to accept from the prophet Elisha what he offered: his healing as a gift from the God of Israel and with his acceptance, spiritual healing. His spiritual healing comes in finding the humility to trust and obey. "He has brought down the mighty from their thrones." Elisha liberates Naaman the mighty. It's done with a concern for Naaman, with a gentle firmness that won't play the game that keeps his pride in place. Elisha doesn't snipe, sledge, or in any way 'cut Naaman down to size' or set out to demean or humiliate him. Instead, he sets him a task of startling simplicity: Wash and you will be clean. Elisha was a nabi, one who speaks the word of life (the creative word of God). What he says, happens.

Mark 1: 40-45

In the gospel, again a leper comes for healing. This leper actually has leprosy. He is an outcast. He cannot enter the Holy City of Jerusalem, but can only sit at the gates, an ancient form of quarantine. He is cut off then both physically and spiritually from his God, the God of Israel. The source of his spiritual malaise is not pride, but rejection. His healing will come not by finding humility, but finding acceptance. He came to Jesus having chosen to desire healing and acceptance. If Jesus chose to accept him, he would be healed. And Jesus stretched out his hand and touched him. And he said to him, "I do choose. Be made clean". He spoke the creative word of God. The effective word that does what it says. Immediately the leprosy left the man and he was made clean and thus ready to be accepted by his people. And so Jesus said "show yourself to the priest and offer for your cleansing what Moses commanded, as a testimony to them." The lowly lifted up. What were the effects of both healings: peace.

However, did the man obey Jesus and keep his healing between himself and the examining priest? No. His disobedience made Jesus' ministry very difficult. Jesus could no longer go into towns openly but had to stay out in the countryside where, still, the people came.

Lent reminds us of our mortality, grounding us in the reality of human frailty, and holds the power to focus our minds on what is important in a well-lived life. Keeping Lent, exercising our self-control, as St. Paul encourages, whether that's in relation to our use of food and drink, time, or money can bring us down to earth. Maybe we'll look up and see what's important to life on a cosmic scale; look around at what is important in all the life to which we are connected on our beautiful earth, and in human life: what is important in your life, in my life - right now.