

May I speak in the name of God, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

I'm feeling particularly American at the moment. I've sung a patriotic song. I had a hot dog on July the 4th. And we were in Pasadena on Friday, and I've been in an earthquake. I could feel it. So I'm feeling very American now. I was reminded though this morning that, before we had Ben doing our sound and there were complaints that I was always muffled and impossible to understand, somebody did come up to me once after a service and suggest that it would be much better if I tried to speak with an American accent, and that you might then ... So I'm very glad that Ben is here to spare us all that.

So if you've been here in the last couple of weeks, you'll know that at the moment in these summer months, we're focusing particularly on the Old Testament readings and following them, because they're given to us in sequence. And I'm particularly interested to see how the Old Testament readings speak to our New Testament readings, and what it is that holds them together, where one illuminates the other.

And I think today that our Old Testament reading and our epistle share a common theme. And that theme is simplicity, an important theme, one that I learnt much about when I was at university. I'll never forget when I arrived, thinking, "Goodness me, there are some terribly clever people here, I don't know how I got here," and going to lectures, and sometimes I did go to lectures, and there were some lecturers who made you feel very stupid, because they would be very learned, and they would be very keen to make you, the listener, realize how learned they are. And they would use words, and I would understand what each word that they were using meant, but when they put them all together, I couldn't make sense at all of what they were saying.

And then there were other lecturers, and you'd walk out of their lectures feeling very bright because they'd make things clear. They had a gift of taking very complex things and making them sound simple. And they were the lecturers who I really came to admire, because I realized that true wisdom is not sounding clever, it's making other people feel clever because you've made things simple. And making things simple is a great and underrated gift. And I realized when I was a student, there was an important distinction to be made

between being simplistic and being simple. And the latter is to be much admired.

And that's the theme I think which comes across in the readings for today. The Old Testament reading features Elisha the prophet. And you might remember, if you were here last week, that it was Elisha who picked up the mantle from this mentor Elijah and carried on the great prophetic tradition that there was in Israel. It's a story, this, which features two kings, a mighty warrior, and lots of money. But it's the simple people in the story who make the difference. They, if you read carefully, are the heroes. The main character in the story is Naaman, who's introduced as a commander of the army, a great soldier, and in high favor with his master, the king of Aram.

And Syria, from where Naaman came, was a mighty power at this time, much stronger and more powerful than the people of Israel, with a highly sophisticated culture. And we know from archeological research that there was a contemporary of Naaman who went to see his hometown of Damascus, and on seeing it from a distance, he decided that there was only one paradise, and he wasn't going to enter it, he was going to wait for his paradise after he died. So he decided not to go into Damascus, such was its overwhelming beauty. He wouldn't say that now, sadly, with Damascus under siege. And we can't mention Naaman the Syrian without pausing to lament the current state of his homeland.

Naaman was a great man from a great county. But he suffered from a terrible disease. We're told Naaman the mighty warrior suffered from leprosy. And Syria might have been a rich and cultured society, but there was nothing that could be done for someone suffering from this dreaded disease. This is why Naaman had to turn his back on his home in Syria and turn towards the land of Israel and be a seeker in a country that he'd always despised and fought against.

And the story of Naaman's search for cleansing in the land of Israel is the story of his ever-constant and ever-deepening humiliation. Until the end of the story, Naaman loses all his pride and confidence in himself and in his country. And only then did he find his healing and the cure for his leprosy.

So the first thing Naaman had to do was to be humble enough to listen to the words of a nameless young slave girl who worked with his wife. She said, "If only Naaman

went to see the prophet in Sumeria, he would cure him of his leprosy." Now, no doubt Naaman had already seen all the top doctors in Syria, and he was now desperate enough to go and to take the advice of his wife's slave girl and travel to a foreign country.

So he went to the king, and he said to the king, "King Aram, King of Syria, can I go?" And Aram said, "Well, you can go, and I'll send you a letter of introduction to the king of Israel so you can go from my court to his court and seek the healing which you need." And the next step in Naaman's humiliation was that he had to leave his own country and head off to Israel. But he was determined to be no one's debtor, so he took with him 10 talents of silvers, 6,000 shekels of gold, and 10 sets of garments. I'm not sure what that's worth in modern money, but I'm sure an awful lot, enough to impress the Israelites with his wealth and his stature. And with all that behind him, Naaman hit the road. He took his money and his letter from the king and headed off to see the king of Israel. Surely that would be enough to gain entrance to the palace, quick access to the prophets and, hopefully, a speedy recovery.

And I suppose it was natural for a man like Naaman to think that the king's palace was the place where everything of significance mattered. But he was wrong. And I love what happens next in the story, it's like some great Shakespearean play, because the king of Israel gets completely the wrong end of the stick. So Naaman arrives with his letter, and the king of Israel thinks, "I'm being set up here. They've sent this great warrior to me to be cured knowing that I can't cure him. Of course I can't cure him of his leprosy, so then he's going to go back to Syria and have a cause for war that I have failed him in the task that I've been set." So the king of Israel thinks he's being tricked. But, thankfully, Elisha the prophet hears about the encounter, and he says to the king, "Let Naaman come to me so that he may know that there's a prophet in the land of Israel." So Naaman has to get back into his chariot and head off with his entourage to look for Elisha the prophet.

And I'd like to imagine what Elisha's prophets and neighbors think of what happens next. All of a sudden, in this humble neighborhood, up pulls Naaman with his chariots laden with treasure, all his entourage, outside of Elisha's house. But Naaman's humiliation is not complete. He's parked up in the rough end of town, and the man he's gone to see doesn't even bother to come out to see him. Elisha sends out a messenger, who says

to Naaman, "Go and wash seven times in the Jordan River, and you shall be clean."

Now, this for Naaman is the final straw. He's gone through several layers of humiliation, but this is the straw that breaks the camel's back, and he gets riled up. "Have I come all this way for this," he says, "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. Are not Abana and Pharpar, the rivers of Damascus, better than all the waters of Israel? Could I not wash in them and be clean? Could I not have gone through this whole rigamarole, left it all behind, and just gone and bathed in the rivers in Syria," he's saying, "What is all this about?"

Naaman was expecting some noble and dignified prophet to come out, no doubt in the surroundings, the palatial surroundings of the king's court, and pronounce, maybe in some mystical ceremony, that he would summon up the spirits and lay his hand on Naaman, and Naaman would be cured. That's what he had in his mind, some great ritual with people in fancy robes doing some strange and mystical thing to cure him. But it wasn't like that. It was all far too simple. "Just go and rinse in the river," Elisha's messenger says. Naaman's pride was hurt. The servant noticed this, and said, "If the prophet had commanded you to do something difficult, would you not have done it?" So, finally, he saw sense. He went and washed in the river and he was made clean. His skin became as a baby's.

And this Old Testament story of Naaman can be seen as an illustration of St. Paul's message in Galatians. That whole epistle is written to address this very point. Many of us approach God as Naaman approached Israel, thinking there must be something worthy about him that was worth saving. Or we think that if we're to find salvation and the cleansing from the sin which holds us back, then we, like Naaman, often think we need to pursue some esoteric and mystical path, to go and see some teacher to whom something has been revealed, to find and unearth some secrets that have been hidden from most of humanity. That's where we often go in search of the secret, the hidden, the mystical.

And God's truth is hidden in plain sight. It's there for all who want to see. And St. Paul writes in Galatians about the simple message of the cross. That's what comes across in that book. We're saved by grace. God's mercy

comes to us not because we deserve it, but as a result of God's goodness. And just as all Naaman had to do was wash in the Jordan, so all we have to do is trust, as St. John says, "in the blood of Jesus Christ shed on the cross which cleanses us from all sin." Is that it? You might think, "Don't I have to do something? Don't my good deeds, my intellect, all my work, all the goodness that I have, all the works that I've done, don't they count for anything?"

"No," St. Paul says. In fact, he wrote the book of Galatians to say no to those questions, because that was the question that was being asked in the early church, as it's been asked in every generation since. The passage we heard read to us by Jonathan is right at the end of the book. But we see here the argument that's made throughout the book. There were those who opposed Paul's teaching. They wanted to add to it. They said, "Well, those non-Jews who've become Christians, who've responded to your preaching on the cross and resurrection of Jesus, there's still something they need to do. They need to be circumcised. They need to become Jews. They need to follow the law. And then they'll be proper Christians."

But Paul says, "No. They don't need to be circumcised, they don't need to become Jewish, they don't need to follow the law, because everything that they need has been provided to them by what God has done in Christ Jesus. There's nothing more to add. It's all about grace," he says. Faith comes as a gift, not as a reward for anything that we've done or said. We can't do anything to earn our salvation. We simply receive it.

Paul says in Ephesians, "For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing, it is the gift of God," which is why he says, "May I never boast of anything except the cross of Christ." That was enough. That was all that mattered. It really is that simple. The death and resurrection of Jesus opened to us the possibility of reconciliation with God and the healing of all that harms us. We simply have to accept that gift.

It's a simple message. But we all like to make life complicated, to add layers of sophistication to our lives. But I've been reminded this week, as I ponder these readings, that there's a great joy in simplicity. And the faith which unites us is deep and simple. And I pray that we, like Naaman, find in God the cleansing and the healing which only He can bring. Amen.