

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

You may have noticed that in recent weeks we've returned to our, if I say normal, I mean our pre-Covid practice of having three readings from the Bible each week, plus a psalm. And I'd forgotten how interesting it can be when preparing a sermon for Sunday to actually look at all the readings and see how sometimes, not all the time, but sometimes the readings can illuminate each other, which certainly happened for me this week. And today, for example, it's interesting and easy to see some similarities between the readings. So both the Old Testament reading and the gospel, both concerned with someone suffering from leprosy.

Also, it's noteworthy that in both of the stories, the one who is healed is a Samaritan, or in the other case a Syrian, so they're both foreigners, which is significant in both of the stories. And this morning I want to focus on the epistle, the reading between the two other ones, and to use it to cast light and interpret the Old Testament lesson, which I realize is rather long and complex, a difficult story. But I think if we understand it in light of the epistle, it can make more sense and also, it can bring out something else that the other two readings have in common, which is the contrast between the foolishness of God's ways and the apparent wisdom and sophistication of the ways of the world.

I'm drawn to the elements of simplicity in today's readings. In our epistle from Corinthians, St. Paul writes this, "For the foolishness of God is wiser than human wisdom. The weakness of God is stronger than human strength." And I think that that truth is worked out beautifully and in the complex story from the Old Testament, we heard of the healing of Naman. I think that story illustrates what St. Paul is writing about when he talks about the foolishness of God.

The story of Naman in the Old Testament which we heard features two kings, a mighty warrior, lots of money, but it's the simple unsophisticated people who make the difference. They're the ones around whom the story hinges without whom Naman would never be healed. They're the ones that make a difference. The main character in the story, as I've said, is Naman, who is introduced as a commander of the army. He's clearly an important and prestigious person in high favor with his boss, the king. And he reports it would seem directly to the king, and he's from Syria.

King of Aram is the king of Syria. And Syria at that time was a much stronger nation, much more powerful than the nation of Israel, with a very developed culture. And a contemporary of Naman when viewing Damascus from a distance refused to enter it, saying that there was just one paradise, and they were going to wait until they died to enter it. Well, he wouldn't say that now, sadly, of Damascus, the state it's in, and we can't mention Naman the Syrian without pausing to lament on the current state of his homeland.

But Naman was a great man from a great country, but he had a terrible illness. Naman, we're told, though a mighty warrior suffered from leprosy. Syria might have been a rich and cultured society, but it couldn't cure someone from leprosy. And this is why Naman has to turn his back on Syria and turn towards Israel and to become a seeker in a country that he'd always despised. The story of Naman search for cleansing in the land of Israel is a story of his ever deepening humiliation until all his pride and confidence in himself and in his country of Syria is completely shattered. Only then does he find that his leprosy is healed.

The first thing that Naman had to do was to be humble enough to listen to the words of a nameless young slave girl in his household. The slave girl said, "If only Naman were with the prophet in Samaria, he would cure him of his leprosy." No doubt, Naman had already seen all the best doctors in Syria. There was nowhere left there for him to turn. He's now desperate enough to follow the advice of a slave girl and head off to Israel. So he goes to the king and says, "King Aram, this might be my last chance." The King of Aram clearly thought Naman had deserved a favor. So he said, "Okay, Naman, you go off to Israel, try and find someone who can cure you, and I'll give you a letter of introduction." So he writes to the King of Israel.

And the next step in Naman's humiliation that he has to leave his country head off to Israel, but he's determined not to be in anybody's debt when he gets there. So he takes 10 talents of silver, 6,000 shekels, and 10 sets of garments. I'm not sure what that's worth in modern money, but my guess is rather a lot, enough to impress the Israelites with his wealth and his stature. So he took his money and his letter from the king and headed off to see the King of Israel. It's interesting that he obviously thought that going to the palace of Israel would be where he'd find all the influential people, where he'd meet the people who could cure him. That was natural for him to do, but he was wrong.

And I love what happens next, it's like a great Shakespearean play. The King of Israel completely misunderstands the letter that he's been given. He thinks it's a trick. He thinks here's my enemy from Syria giving me a letter asking me to cure his right-hand man of leprosy. How on earth can I do that? He's condemning me to fail. He's setting me up so that he won't get cured of leprosy. Then he'll have an excuse to come and invade us. So he gets the wrong end of the stick. But fortunately for him, Elisha, the prophet, heard about the encounter and said to the king, "Let Naman come to me so that he may learn that there is a prophet in Israel." So Naman had to go back to his chariot and take his entourage to find Elisha.

And I'd like to imagine what Elisha the prophet's neighbors thought of this mighty warrior arriving at his home with his chariot, his entourage, stuffed full of all his possessions. He arrived in the humble neighborhood with chariots laden with gold.

But Naman's humiliation is still 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 turn out to greet him. Elisha sent out a messenger who said to Naman, "Go and wash seven times in the River Jordan, and you shall be clean."

This for Naman is the final straw. He got all riled up, says to his people, "I've come all this way for this and someone who can't even be bothered to come out to see me." 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 Parpar, the rivers of Damascus, better than all the waters of Israel? Could I not wash in them and be clean?"

Naman was expecting some noble and dignified ritual performed by an exotic prophet in a beautiful place, and all he received was a curt message from the messenger, "Go and wash seven times in the river." It all seemed a bit dull and anticlimactic. "This can't be all there is," he thought. "Simply rinse off in the river? It can't be that simple. Surely not." His pride was hurt. His servants noticed it and said ... again, notice the importance of the nameless humble people in the story who persuaded him to carry on with what the prophet had said. They said, "If the prophet had commanded you to do something difficult, would you not have done it?"

Finally, he saw sense. He washed in the river and he was healed. His skin became like the skin of a young boy. And I think this Old Testament story of Naman can be seen as an illustration of what St. Paul is talking about in the passage that was read and in much of his writings. Many of us approach God as Naman approached Israel, thinking there must be something about us which marks us out as worth saving. Or we think that if we're to find salvation and the cleansing from our sin, which holds us back, there needs ... Surely will need to pursue some esoteric teaching in a mystical place.

But St. Paul says in his writings over and over again, what's central to our salvation, the only thing that can cure us, is the simple familiar message of the cross of Jesus Christ. We're saved by grace. God's mercy comes to us not because we deserve it, but as a result of God's love and goodness. And just as all Naman had to do was to wash in the River Jordan to be healed, so all we need to do to find salvation and reconciliation with God is to trust as St. John says, "In the blood of Jesus Christ, shed on the cross, which cleanses us from all sin."

This is the simple, well known, familiar message of the cross, which is foolishness to those who are perishing, but the power of God to those who are being saved. The apparent foolishness of the message, is it simplicity? Like Naman, we might be tempted to say, "Is that it? Don't I have to do something? Don't my gifts and all my good works count for anything?" "No," says St. Paul. "We find peace with God simply by accepting what he has done on our behalf through the death and resurrection of his son Jesus Christ. We're called to respond to what he has done for us in Jesus. Faith comes as a gift, not as a reward."

It really is that simple. The death and resurrection of Jesus opens for us the possibility of reconciliation with God, which we are called simply to accept as a gift. We all like to make life complicated, to add layers of sophistication to our lives, but I've been reminded this week through our readings that there is a great joy to be found in simplicity, and the faith which unites us is simple, but deep. I pray that we, like Naman, might find in God the cleansing and the healing, which only he can bring. Amen.