

WHAT DO YOU EXPECT?

Have you ever noticed how human beings dislike the unexpected? Except when the unexpected is a huge joke (admit it – we all like seeing Jerry getting the better of Tom - and I am talking about the cartoon mouse and cat, not the member of the congregation who share those names!) or a satisfying twist at the end of a story – we like villains to be caught out by their own cleverness. So I decided to begin this sermon with a joke. Jokes work on their unexpectedness, on the punch-line that we do not anticipate – which is why a joke is never as funny the second time you hear it.

After considerable research into jokes about the unexpected or about Naaman, I finally had to settle for 2 about preachers:

Question: What do you have when you have seventy preachers buried up to their necks in sand?

Answer: Not enough sand.

Question: What do you call it when you have seventy preachers at the bottom of Sydney Harbour?

Answer: A good start.

Yet after all this seeking for a good start to my sermon, finally I remembered that the story I wanted was – unexpectedly – from my own life! It goes like this. When our sons were very small and we were living in London, we had no car and I had to travel by bus. For some reason which I cannot remember, I was going from Sutton to Kingston on Thames with the boys, the push-chair and all the other paraphernalia. The bus was full of old ladies, except for one young lad of about 17 who was sitting at the back. He was frankly awful. It was in the days when punk had just come in. His hair was an orange Mohican. He was wearing a leather jacket covered with metal studs. He had rings not just through his ears but his nose as well! And he looked as if he had not washed for a week. Naturally we all sat as near the front of the bus as we could. When we got to Kingston, the bus slowed up and all the old ladies began to get up and I began to struggle with the pushchair and the kids. As the bus drew up, the young man pushed his way determinedly past us all and was the first to alight. You can imagine the muttered comments! And then came the unexpected: once off the bus, the young man turned round and carefully assisted each of the old ladies as she alighted from the bus, took the pushchair and opened it for me and then disappeared into Kingston without a word. We too were speechless – we did not expect the unexpected.

So – what do you expect? From life or maybe just this morning? Well, you probably expect a proper sermon – something with a carefully thought-out argument and a clear theological point that you can reflect on in the week to come. Sorry – it isn't going to be like that – you are doomed to disappointment. What I want to reflect on is the nature of the Old Testament story, of which we heard an infuriatingly truncated version this morning. Why on earth they cut out the bit about Naaman going to his king and asking for permission to go to Israel and the king loading him with gifts and an official letter, I don't know, since the story doesn't make sense without it. I've always been fascinated by this story, not least because it is a brilliant bit of story-telling, full of high drama, a full cast of lively characters and several unexpected twists. The whole of Chapter 5 of 2 Kings is well worth reading and thinking about, so

here are some of my thoughts, which centre around “What is he like, this man Naaman?” What do we find out through his actions and the reactions of others?

“What is he like, this man Naaman?” He’s good-looking – His name comes from the Hebrew verb *naem*, “to be beautiful or “well formed.”

“What is he like, this man Naaman?” – he’s a general in the conquering army, victorious, rewarded by the enemy king, who doesn’t even keep his raiders under control, but seizes children as slaves.

“What is he like, this man Naaman?” – disgusting, he’s diseased – period. That’s actually exactly how the Hebrew puts it: “And the man was a great man—leprosy.” Frightened, desperate, in shock, angry – how does it feel suddenly to have a life-changing disease?

“What is he like, this man Naaman?” Powerful and manipulative – he goes straight to the top – and the king supports him with all the financial and political pressure he can apply. The king of Israel is scared witless – and so he should be, Naaman’s already beaten him once.

“What is he like, this man Naaman?” Arrogant and superstitious – roaring straight up to Elisha’s door in his chauffeur-driven limousine and expecting him to come running out respectfully and perform the required magic.

“What is he like, this man Naaman?” – Baffled and rebellious – Have I had to come all the way from Damascus to paddle around in that piddling little stream, that muddy excuse for a river? No way!

“What is he like, this man Naaman?” – Enraged and blinded – he cannot see beyond the physical circumstances and the people involved to the actual nature of the power he is asking to help him. He’s going to storm off. Get back in the car. Go home. Story ended. But it isn’t and he isn’t either.

“What is he *really* like, this man Naaman?” – under all the outward trappings?

He’s good-looking – and more than good-looking. His name also means “to be delightful, or pleasant.” It has the idea of being “gracious”. And he’s certainly generous in his wish to reward Elisha.

He’s successful – God has favoured him. O, not just by letting him win against Israel. Not even by allowing him to play an important part in the story of Israel. No, God favours him because God cares enough about Naaman to make himself known to this man, the enemy, the foreigner, with all his faults.

He is a listener – he listens to his wife and, through her, to the child who is a slave in his household. He listens to his servants and is moved by their advice. He listens eventually to the word of God.

He is loved – why else would a foreign child (the Hebrew calls her “a little, little girl”) care about whether his disease was cured or not? Why else would his servants address him as “My father” and feel confident enough to give him advice?

He is brave – not just in battle, but, as his servants point out, he is willing to accept a difficult and dangerous challenge to be worthy of his healing.

He is humble and willing to admit he has been wrong.

He is spiritually aware – he recognises the power of God working in what has happened to him.

And he is changed – when he is healed, he becomes literally like a young child again. He understands that he must live by the truth.

And he knows the cost and the difficulties that lie ahead.

All this - in one man called Naaman. And we haven't even considered all the other people in the story.

Human beings like Naaman are all around us. Every one of them a mixed bundle of contradictory qualities and behaviour. I wonder how often we miss God at work in them just because we human beings don't really like the unexpected? Fortunately God revels in it – all he asks is that we find the courage to trust and go along with him.

NOTES:

2 Kings

Beauty is skin-deep, changing your spots

Naaman

In the original Hebrew text we find only the word “leprous,” which highlights or emphasizes Naaman’s problem--the dreaded disease of leprosy.

Literally it reads: "And the man was a great man--leprosy.

Most often, the skin disease is translated as "leprosy," but that translation is debatable, especially when we notice that Naaman's particular disease did not prevent him from interacting with others in a variety of social contexts. However, even if Naaman was not a social outcast, his greatness is marred by his disease.

she is a young, a *na'arah*, but this word is itself modified by the adjective, "little" (*qatanah*). Frank Spina explains, "Thus she is a 'little little girl.'"

The Aramean king sends along with Naaman some lavish gifts: ten talents of silver (roughly seven hundred fifty pounds), six thousand shekels of gold (about one hundred fifty pounds), and ten sets of clothing.

There is some humor amidst his anguish. First, the lack of mention in the letter about a prophet has led to the king of Israel's assumption that he is responsible to heal Naaman. And second, the gift to the king included a number of new garments, which could presumably replace the ones he tore!

Perhaps these servants were themselves believers in the Lord of Israel and knew the power of the Lord, but probably not. Other than the fact they were attendants to Naaman, we know nothing about them. Still, they had wise counsel for the general.

(1) They were courteous. They called Naaman “my father,” showing respect and submission. They chose their words carefully that they might persuade Naaman and help him.

(2) They spoke from what they knew about Naaman. He was proud and courageous; they knew he was willing to do a great deed.

Servants reframe narratives here, and they become the instrument of salvation.

The servant girl spoke to her mistress (Naaman's wife); Naaman's wife spoke to Naaman; Naaman spoke to the king; the king writes to the king. That is the way of the world, and it is observed in the narrative here.

This great, foreign military leader has come to faith in Israel's God, and he has come to see himself as a servant after becoming like a little child.

Thus, the great man (verse 1), through the intercession of the little girl (verse 3), is made like a little boy (verse 14).

The story revolves around people moving from ignorance and misconception to genuine knowledge.

Showy miracles for the important? Not here,

www.idealprosy.dignity.org

www.leprosy.org

www.nippon.foundation.or.jp

<http://bphc.hrsa.gov/nhd/NHD-MUSEUM.HISTORY.HTM>>

LUKE

Verse 15: “saw”: i.e. understood what had happened. Not only does he see that he is healed; he sees too that he has found God and his salvation. He is converted.

Verse 16: “thanked him”: The word used for *thank* has connotations of proclaiming God’s forgiveness. While the word in the Greek is *eucharistein*, it appears that it has not yet acquired an exclusively [liturgical](#) connotation. It also occurs in a non-*eucharistic sense in John [11:41](#), and frequently in the Pauline epistles.

Go and show – implication “you asked and I’ve done it” – no need to touch or do anything spectacular? One returns – he is “saved” not just “cleansed”.

Islamic traditions about Jesus : /225/ It is related that Jesus passed by a man who was blind, leprous, crippled, paralyzed on both sides of his body, and mutilated with lesions from leprosy. the man was saying, "Praise be to God, who healed me from what he has inflicted upon so many of his creatures." Jesus asked him, "You there what kind of affliction can I see that has not been visited upon you?" The man replied, "Spirit of God, I am better than him in whose heart God has not planted the share of His knowledge that He has planted in mine." "You have spoken truly," said Jesus, "Give me your hand." The man stretched forth his hand and behold, his face and form were transformed into the fairest and most comely, for God had cured him of his affliction. Thereafter, he accompanied Jesus and worshipped with him. [*Muslim Jesus*] (early 12C CE)

Jesus doesn’t approach the 10 Lepers. Then he heals them as their backs are turned to him, as they’re walking away.

When only one comes back to express his gratitude, Jesus is torqued off that the other nine are ingrates. But maybe they’re just pissed that Jesus didn’t touch them.

Off the lepers go. It is while they go that they are healed. This was implicit in Jesus’ command; otherwise why go to the priests? Rubbing the salt in, Luke has Jesus announce that this tenth leper, the Samaritan, has been made whole, a image of full salvation, the very aspiration of the best people who would seek to avoid Samaritans and others who today might be written off as Palestinians.

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it does reflect where Jesus' priorities lay. Giving glory to God, recognising that in Jesus God was in action, focusing on God was what made it appropriate for Jesus to declare the man's wholeness in a broader sense. True worship is recognising where God is active and, as the following verses in 17:20-21 indicate, acknowledging when the reign of God is in our midst.

The story is deliberately subversive. Lepers were not very respectable and Samaritans were despised by many. Suddenly one of them becomes our high priest, as it were, our model of salvation. And those who belong get it wrong. A simple but disturbing story that lives itself out in every generation.

The thanks and praise of the Samaritan was a natural response to the free and undeserved mercy of God which was his in Christ, just for the asking. He didn't earn the kindness of God. He just asked for it and it was freely given. He knew he couldn't earn it, he was an outcast, a Samaritan. So, having accepted God's grace, thanks and praise was his natural response.

the lepers would be the first people to encounter Jesus since they were, by Jewish law, obliged to remain outside town.

But the way they address Jesus is unique. Well, to put it differently, the only other times that the word "Master" (*epistata*) is used in the NT are when people who are clearly identified as disciples, or are about to become disciples, address Jesus. Luke, in fact, is the only author to use the word in the NT. Peter uses the word in addressing Jesus when he is out fishing and has not caught a fish all night (5:5); the disciples *en masse* use the term when their boat is about to sink and they call to Jesus for help (8:24); Peter uses the term on the Mount of Transfiguration when he says to Jesus that it is good that they are all present with Jesus (9:33).

But Jesus doesn't touch. He doesn't apparently approach them. All he says is for them to show themselves to the priest. The form of the command in v. 14 is interesting. It can literally be translated, "Get you going and show yourself to the priests.." In other words, there is a sort of urgency in Jesus' response to them, a sense that, as we would say, "What are you standing around for? Go and do what the law requires."

At the end of v. 16 the text just says, "And he himself was a Samaritan." The word "*autos*" (the intensive pronoun) is not really necessary in this context, but here it is. Thus, Luke wants us to pause over it for a second. Its meaning is something like, "This guy, the one who was healed, yep, HE was a Samaritan."