St Peter the Fisherman – Whitianga
February 11th 2024

Theme: (Healing the Leper)

I runga i te ingoa o te papa, te tama, me te wairua tapu.

*In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.*

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I typically prepare for any reflection by reading through all the texts scheduled for the coming Sunday. This week, both the Old Testament and the Gospel texts deal with God’s healing power, although executed by two different people. I was struck by a message that is not the one typically applied to these readings.

Namely, the difference in attitudes between Naaman and the beggar. Although they were both afflicted with a horrible disease that would have classed them as outcasts, with no known cure at the time, Naaman’s prestige was such that he was still able to function in his role as an Army commander high in his King’s favour.

(Naaman)

However, the nameless beggar was living as the typical societal outcast isolating himself from others, demonstrating his impurity by warning people of his illness.

(The leper)

He had to wear torn clothes, let his hair be unkempt, cover the lower part of his face and shout 'Unclean!’ while ringing a bell when other people came near. Unbelievably humiliating.

In other words, power and prestige allowed Naaman to live a comfortable near-normal life, whereas our beggar had a desperate existence dependant on other people’s charity for food etc. That position of prestige and the contra position of ‘bottom of the heap’ played a large part in how each of these two approached the possible opportunity of a cure.

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Naaman commanded the army of Aram (Syria) and was himself a “mighty warrior”. But he was a leper, a condition that made him ceremonially unclean and normally socially isolated. However, it looks as though his high social status blunted the social ostracism that normally accompanied the disease. The story underlines Naaman’s exalted status in several ways. Naaman controls great wealth and showed it when he goes to Aram.

(Naaman at Elisha’s house)

He brings with him about 1,000 pounds of silver, 150 pounds of gold, and ten suits of clothing — huge treasure! And he comes with an entourage consisting of “horses and chariots,” a procession of power. The man who rolls up in front of Elisha’s house that afternoon, horses tossing their heads, chariots gleaming, boxes of silver and gold ready to buy a cure, is accustomed to bows of honour and unquestioning obedience. If there is a prophet in Israel powerful enough to heal him, Naaman clearly has the means to persuade that prophet. He assumes that what he needs, he will get.

However, Elisha dishonours the great man at his door. He does not show himself; instead, he sends a messenger. Plus, the message offers further humiliation for Naaman. No special rite of healing will be performed. The prophet will not meet with him at all. “Go, wash in the Jordan seven times.” Elisha sends Naaman off to take a self-serve, third-rate-river cure. Outrageous! Furious, he drives off. Perhaps it is only Naaman’s desperation for a cure that keeps him from burning down the prophet’s house.

It is the courage of his servants that saves Naaman. What temerity they have, to confront their master and reason with him! Fortunately, Naaman has the grace of being able to hear advice from outside the bubble of his privilege. He swallows his pride and treks down to the Jordan.

(Naaman at the Jordan)

While his entourage watches, he dips himself seven times in the humble river.  Not included in today’s bit of text, but like the tenth leper healed by Jesus, Naaman returns to give thanks. He comes and stands before Elisha and offers the presents he has brought. Now the wealth he has brought is not an incentive, but truly an offering. However, Elisha makes it clear that the power of God is not for sale. It is a gift, a grace. So Naaman is sent away with two reality checks.

Jesus and the leper)

Today’s **Gospel**, all of six verses, captures Jesus’ encounter with a leper. This text, Jesus’ healing of the leper is one of several stories that deal with Jesus’ violation of ritual boundaries.”

Jesus’ prior “boundary crossing” upset the religious authorities, where behavioural rules were adhered to very strictly. He has just healed Simon’s mother-in-law, where he touches a sick woman not his relative. In this encounter he will touch a leper. This time, unlike Naaman and Elisha, we have a real outcast and a beggar, who is desperate enough to risk rejection and humiliation by confronting Jesus, with not only a plea but almost a challenge. “If you **choose** you can make me clean”. Jesus responds with the love and pity to someone in need, which defined his whole ministry.

The trouble was, that he was becoming so famous for his **healing** capabilities, that he was being swamped with people wanting help, and was being prevented from doing the **teaching about the coming of the true kingdom of God** which was his primary ministry focus.

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Thus, after the cure, Jesus instructs the man: “See that you tell no one anything…” in the hope that he could get back to his teaching purpose. Instead, the cured man tells everyone! We can’t blame him really – his whole life had been transformed by this encounter with Jesus.

The story of the healing of Naaman is about entitlement, power, and pride, with an inherent expectation that because of his wealth and status, his request would naturally be granted in a way that reflected his position.

The story of the beggar, however, is one of desperation to the point of being willing to risk further rejection and potential punishment. He knew, by making his request, that he was crossing the boundaries between clean and unclean, and thus was uncertain of the outcome. But he had become so overwhelmed with his virtually hopeless plight that with nothing to offer, in desperation and little confidence of being healed, he approached Jesus.

There are huge differences in approach and expectations in these two stories, which was what interested me this time of reading them and thus grasp these different lessons within them.

The fact we are doing well, effectively “paying all our Christian dues” so to speak, does not mean we will be considered more important or of value to God than someone society may consider to be down at the bottom of the heap. It’s about how we approach God. God expects us to approach with total humility, understanding that it is **if God so chooses**, our prayer request will be answered.

(Naaman and the leper)

Naaman had to let go his sense of entitlement and humble himself, to be made clean. The beggar was the only one of the two men who understood that. “If you choose, you can make me clean”. When we come before God, we must come with no expectations, just hope, that our prayers will be answered. We lay our ‘leprosy baggage’ at God’s feet and ask humbly that we may be healed. The beggar with nothing to offer was actually healed more quickly than Naaman with **his** expectations of ‘prompt service’. Naaman had to let go his sense of entitlement and humble himself, to be made clean.

Importantly, the leper’s story makes clear that God’s will in Jesus, to touch, to cleanse, and to make whole is not just imagination or wish. It has the power to touch lives, broken and suffering. It also makes clear that the proclamation of this good news has the power, even today, to burst the boundaries of constraint that would keep it from being heard. The story of this Jesus will get out!

That is definitely one thing that we can do for him!

Amen