



## Listening to ordinary people

### 2 Kings 5:1-14

During this winter time, I want to focus on two Old Testament passages – the first from 2 Kings; and then we will look at the prophet Amos and one of his most memorable themes.

There is a note of pathos in our first passage. We read that a Syrian commander, Naaman, was a successful warrior, “but he had leprosy” (v.1). His name means “pleasant” and this is a tragic play on words, because his disease was far from pleasant.

It is important to recognise that leprosy was a generic term for a number of skin diseases and probably the greatest challenge that leprosy brought, alongside the physical limitations for a person, was the social stigma that so often surrounded the condition. Graeme Auld makes the point that the disease was not advanced, in that he still had access to the king (v.4).

However, we are looking at something far wider than a skin disease. It is fair to say that the disease was more than skin deep! Naaman is shown to be a proud person who believed others should treat him with respect and deference. It is, therefore, significant that my theme relates to the way Naaman listened to an ordinary person.

In the narrative, when Elisha didn't come to greet him and heal him in a manner that he felt appropriate to his position, he stormed off. In order to bring healing, he was encouraged to bathe seven times in the River Jordan, which one writer suggested sounded like “a political trick and an attempt to humiliate him”.

The role of servants or ordinary people is significant. Those who worked for Naaman had the wisdom to encourage him to obey what the prophet had asked. The one who was used to giving orders now had to accept advice. However, after persuasion, he did muster the humility to obey God's call through the prophet and was cured of his leprosy. The healing that came was far more than just the release from leprosy.

The fact that a person of high standing is prepared not only to do what the prophet asked, but also to do it at the behest of a servant is a powerful message, from which we could all learn a great deal.

The success of Naaman's seven dips in the Jordan fundamentally changed his attitude towards Elisha, demonstrated by the fact that he returned to him and offered a gift which Elisha refused. (v.16) A respectable warrior wanted to pay for medicine or services rendered. Nevertheless, Naaman's ultimate response would please the prophet.

Text: 2 Kings 5:15b

“Now, I know that there is no God in all the world except in Israel.”

I have chosen as my title “Listening to Ordinary People” for we find in this passage that although Naaman had a skin disease – that is leprosy – he suffered a greater malady; pride of heart and soul. He could have easily resisted the message of an ordinary person.

Most people would recognise that pride is a real problem to human personality and can restrict one's capacity to experience the best in life. Peter Marshall, in his own wonderful way, captured the heart of this in one of his prayers:



“Lord ... where we are wrong, make us willing to change, and where we are right, make us easy to live with.”

Pride can be defined in relation to our relying upon ourselves rather than God. In much of the Christian moral tradition, pride is sinful; it is understood as self-congratulation. This “puffed up” spirit is not consistent with the person we meet in Jesus Christ.

The Bible is replete with stories which show how God uses ordinary people – peasants, children and those who come from outside the chosen people. God’s healing and presence is not restricted to a select people.

- In this story, the servants play a vital role
- It was the maid of Naaman’s wife, a young woman, who told them about the prophet
- God often uses those considered insignificant to speak his word of life and peace.

### **Pride so often holds us prisoner**

Naaman was proud of his standing. We acknowledge that there are aspects of pride that are good. One only has to look at the realms of science, sport, art and performance. The difficulty comes in the jump from what we are proud of – to the cause of our pride, which can too often focus upon self. The issue is a problem when we arrive at the conclusion that we are either better than someone else or good – and neither may be the case!

It is important to recognise that our success and achievements are so often a consequence of being in the right place at the right time – and partly due to the contribution of others.

However, let us consider the positive aspects. Aristotle, for example, spoke of pride as the crown of the virtues, although even then it was as a mean between two extremes: on one side undue humility; and on the other vanity. Nobody would want to deny the positive connotation when a father says, “I am proud of you, son!” or the pride that a person feels in a job well done.

An Aesop’s fable tells of how the animals were arguing about who had the largest litters. Some talked about twins and triplets and others bragged of a dozen or more offspring. Finally, the lioness, rather quietly, contributed to the conversation: “Only one,” she said, “but that one is a lion!”

It has been said that pride is the only disease known to humans which makes everyone sick except the person who has it!

Naaman’s affliction of pride could be argued to be one that is seen most often in powerful and successful people; eating away at the soul and consuming all purpose. You can see how such pride would prevent him from taking ordinary people seriously.

Let us take a closer look at Naaman’s situation:

### **He experienced success**

Naaman was considered a man of honour and his military success would give him particular status. This story serves as an excellent analogy for us. It would have taken time to gain the kind of position that Naaman held. The respect with which he was



regarded indicates he was more than just a soldier. He appears to have decency and an upstanding character, which would also gain him admiration.

Certainly one of the messages in this passage is that success does not necessarily mean one is protected from life's disappointments. This fearless warrior bore in his body the tell-tale marks of the afflicted.

When referring to Naaman's splendid reputation, perhaps we ought to refer to "apparent" success, because the leprosy would carry another message. We are not aware how this leprosy developed, but we do know that it would result in a great deal of social ostracism. People would want to avoid someone with leprosy. It may well have carried the message "There is no cure!"

Like AIDS in our day, leprosy was no respecter of persons. With AIDS there are numerous examples of unhealthy promiscuity, the accidental use of needles, or the completely innocent transmission of blood, which indicate the complexity of the issue.

Who can forget Arthur Ashe who died prematurely in 1993? He was the first black tennis player to win the US Open, Wimbledon and the Australian Open. He died from an AIDS-related illness following a blood transfusion during his second by-pass surgery in 1983. He and his wife Jeanne kept this information private until they felt they had no alternative, as Arthur's health deteriorated.

I use this illustration because many successful people have burdens to bear, which are often hidden from view. The success of Naaman was widely recognised and verse 1 is very descriptive, because we are told not only of his prominence in relation to his military exploits, but also that he was "highly regarded". Can you imagine what it would mean for him to know he had leprosy?

- What was it like the day he discovered he had leprosy?
- What was needed to keep such news private?
- What was it like when the news got out, even within his household?

Pride is most dangerous when it relates to the deep areas of our spirituality. Perhaps the most subtle form of pride is when a person aspires to or claims some kind of advanced or superior spiritual place. This is not suggested of Naaman, but there is a message here for all of us.

### **He kept his secret to himself**

I can only begin to speculate about the experience of keeping such news to himself. But I know that many people do struggle with things they feel they must keep private.

I knew someone whose marriage broke up many years ago and he refused to talk about it. He tendered his apology to every function where he might be expected to appear with his spouse – and at Christmas, when he sent cards, he included her name, so no-one could even begin to detect what had happened in his life. Of course, many of us would have wanted to help.

Your heart goes out to such people; keeping secret what doesn't need to be private. We know that even some of the servants were aware of what Naaman may have thought was a secret. Perhaps this indicates the closeness of his household.



The close relationships within the household meant that ordinary people had a special place in his life, even if this would not normally be the case. And this was primarily because of the influence of his wife.

### **Pride often hinders progress**

The pride of Naaman is demonstrated in the way he expresses his sadness regarding the prophet's response. He felt he was treated shabbily; he expected the prophet to provide him with VIP treatment, wave his hands dramatically over the spot and cure him (v.11). Naaman imagined he would be healed by some kind of magical technique of the prophet, rather than by an obedient response to God.

J Oswald Saunders, in his outstanding book *Spiritual Leadership*, wrote, "Nothing is more distasteful to God than self-conceit. This first and fundamental sin in essence aims at enthroning self at the expense of God ... Pride is a sin of whose presence its victim is least conscious ... If we are honest, when we measure ourselves by the life of our Lord who humbled Himself even to death on a cross, we cannot but be overwhelmed with the tawdriness and shabbiness, and even the vileness, of our hearts."

Elisha realised that this physical disease could only be cured if the underlying spiritual disease – in this case "pride" – was also dealt with. Pride prevented Naaman from seeking help in the first place and then, secondly, receiving it. Thankfully, he overcame this, but let us also note:

### **The faithfulness of those considered insignificant**

There is an underlying theme of how God uses those people who are often considered insignificant – for example peasants, women who were little regarded, children and people of other races. In this particular biblical context, these thoughts are gathered together and seen to bring about God's purposes. Here, the servants play a vital role.

On one of Naaman's military engagements, he brought home a captured young girl and his wife employed her in their home. The relationship is obviously good because she spoke about Naaman's illness to her mistress. (v.3) Empathy and compassion provoked her to share with Naaman's wife what she knew. All the money in the world could not buy this valuable information.

Israel and Syria were officially at peace at this time and so the military raid referred to in verse 2 was more than likely a border skirmish. Such tension has continued to exist in the Middle East to this day. It was not, however, a highly aggressive time, allowing people to be part of households and enjoying a normal existence. This clearly appears to be the case with the young woman from Israel. Today, the story of Syria is a painful one with many Christians fleeing persecution. However, here is a servant:

- Her lowly position would help to prevent her from being proud
- Her lowly position did not prevent her from having concern for others
- Her lowly position is matched with a good relationship with others.

This servant's faithfulness is indicated by her knowledge of the prophet. We may ask ourselves how she knew about him. She may have actually heard him – or at least be



aware of his reputation. She said to her mistress, "If only my master would see the prophet ..." (v.3)

The influence of someone of apparent insignificance meant that Naaman went to his own line-manager, King Ben-Hadad II, to gain help and access to the prophet.

People of influence can be foolish

When Naaman's wife informed him of this ray of hope that came from the lips of the servant girl, he spoke to Ben-Hadad, who in turn sent Naaman with a letter of introduction to the king of Israel. Not unreasonably, the assumption was that the king controlled the prophet. This was not the case – and this led the king of Israel to tear his robes and rise in fury. (v.7)

Leprosy could lead to a person being excluded from worship and many of life's personal encounters. It had, therefore, a greater "religious" significance than diseases in general. This may account for the king's horrified response: "Am I God?" (v.7)

People of influence often think they can change circumstances simply by using their authority. In this case, a letter of introduction and many gifts (v.5) demonstrate this to be the case. So he goes to the king and not the prophet. There are some helpful themes here:

- People often choose the wrong course of action
- People often believe possessions will provide a response
- This often causes an opposite, unhelpful response.

There is a simple ditty which runs ...  
Sometime when you're feeling important,  
Sometime when your ego's way up;  
Sometime when you take it for granted  
That you are the prize winning 'pup';  
Sometime when you feel that your absence  
Would leave an unfillable hole,  
Just follow these simple instructions,  
And see how it humbles your soul.  
Take a bucket and fill it with water,  
Put your hand in it up to your wrist.  
Now pull it out fast and the hole that remains  
Is the measure of how you'll be missed.  
You may splash all you please as you enter,  
And stir up the water galore,  
But STOP and you'll find in a minute,  
It's back where it was before.

### **Healing is of his whole person**

News of the king's response reached the ears of Elisha the prophet and, knowing that the tearing of robes was very significant, he sent a message to him: 'Why have you torn your robes? Make the man come to me and he will know there is a prophet in Israel.' (v.8)



Presumably the king sent a message to Naaman and consequently Naaman goes to the prophet's house. We are told how he arrives: 'So Naaman went with his horses and chariots and stopped at the door of Elisha's house.' (v.9) He carried with him gifts which the Syrian king had given to Naaman, along with a letter of introduction. Some commentators go to great lengths to explain the value of the gifts. (v.v.5-6)

Elisha sends out a messenger, instructing Naaman what to do, "Go, wash yourself seven times in the Jordan, and your flesh will be restored and you will be cleansed." (v.10) The instruction is intended to demonstrate that healing comes from the power of God, because the prophet himself was not a healer.

Ritual washings were practised among many Eastern religions and the number seven is certainly symbolic of completeness.

What was Naaman's reaction? ... he "went away angry" (v.11). He felt deprived of a personal reception and appropriate religious ritual. He felt that what he had been asked to do in the Jordan was a kind of insult.

Naaman had his own idea of how the cure should be handled. However, Elisha sends out an ordinary servant with simple instructions, in order to make it clear that Naaman could not design his own cure. That was in God's hands.

Today, even followers of Jesus Christ prefer spectacular demonstrations to ensure salvation. Russell Dilday comments, "They will suffer, build churches, give money, sacrifice privileges ... And, because the plan is so simple, many turn away as Naaman did and refuse the greatest of gifts."

### **He was brought to a halt**

Although Naaman turns away, his staff are more pragmatic (v.13) and they persuade him. They have a deep knowledge of him and care for him. We read, '... if the prophet had told you to do some great thing, would you not have done it? How much more, then, when he tells you "Wash and be cleansed"?' (v.13) To Naaman's credit, he went down to the Jordan, followed the instructions and his flesh was restored.

He was brought to a halt on his journey, as the staff convinced him to humble himself and wash as he had been instructed.

Jesus Christ often replicated the prophets. He both healed lepers and illustrated faith through them. One of the most memorable stories in the gospels is the occasion when he healed ten lepers (Luke 17:11-19).

He gave them conventional instructions and requirements for healing; they were to show themselves to the priest, but only one returned to show gratitude of faith. The parallel with the underlying message must not be lost on us.

### **He received God's saving power in choosing the right way**

God was at work in the life of this successful and often self-reliant man. What did Naaman have to lose except his pride?



This is surely one of the best known of accounts in the Old Testament. Its play on words is remarkable, as is its sense of narrative. It is powerful in pointing out the deeper aspects of human nature and shows an early biblical account of the healing nature of God.

We can choose to read this Old Testament account at a superficial level or we can ask what it has to say to us today.

Pride is a major challenge in life today. We see it in politics and in public life. We know it can cause the breakdown of relationships and it damages human personality at the deepest level. As followers of Jesus Christ, we must be willing to be reasonable judges of ourselves, if we are to offer meaningful service in the world.

Gerhard von Rad helpfully observes that Elisha leaves Naaman “completely to his new faith, or better, to God’s hand which has sought him and found him.”

Charles Swindoll tells the story of a pastor who was voted the most humble pastor in America. His congregation was so pleased they struck him a medal that said, “The most humble pastor in America”. They took it away from him the next Sunday because he wore it!!