

2 Kings 5:1-19

Psalm 30

Galatians 6:7-10

Luke 10:1-11, 16-20

Knowing the power that gives life

Humility is a quality that we all like to find in a person. It usually means they have not forgotten their roots and are at home with themselves. Humility is sometimes linked with a capacity for self depreciation, or even self-hatred, but this is a misunderstanding. Humility is from the word humilis - lowly, and is related to the word humus - ground, which points to our connection with the earth and all its creatures. Genesis reminds us that we are creatures of God, made from the soil of the earth to which we will return. It is no accident that humble people are “down to earth” - they are content to be what they are - children of God. The humble are those who do not need lies and evasions to mask their real selves, or inflate their importance in the eyes of others. They do not regard others as competitors or rivals; they do not waste energy envying others and are happy to work with what they have. Like those spoken of in the Sermon on the Mount the humble are those who know their need of God. Humility is the word that captures what Jesus said and did, from washing the feet of his disciples to emptying himself on the cross. He was able to do this because he accepted God as God and himself as a child of God, and he did not seek to be other than what he was called to be.

Humility is something we seem to have to learn. It may come to us peacefully: through having a positive mentor, or through a deep and sustained attachment to Christian faith. It may come to us through a crisis which causes us to see through life’s pretensions to a deeper, truer reality. In other words, humility may be something we learn by having to pass through humiliation. Getting mud on our face, or finding that our name has become mud, may be the moment of learning that creates the fertile soil, the humus, from which new life grows. It could be an illness which exposes for us how slim is the thread of life and how frail our mortal strength, causing us to reconsider who we trust for our life. It could be that a broken relationship leaves us floundering in a chaotic sea of practical and emotional distress, out of which we lay hold of life again in new ways. Or perhaps we suffer a profound loss that causes us to re-evaluate everything we have so far held dear.

Naaman was a top military commander; triumphant in battle, he was favoured by the King. Then he contracted leprosy. We don’t know whether he had true leprosy, but it doesn’t really matter: the only path ahead for those with such a diagnosis was the total humiliation of becoming a social outcast, despised by all. The presence of the disease brought him to the point where his life was about to completely disintegrate. Then a voice of hope came from an unexpected, lowly quarter. The least member of his household, a slave girl captured in a raid on Israel, told of a prophet of God who had the power of life and healing. A miracle might be possible but Naaman must journey to foreign parts, because in those days some thought God’s power was limited to a place.

As the story unfolds we are given a graphic picture of how society normally operates. No more mention of the slave girl: Commander speaks to King who, valuing his high

ranking officer, writes a reference to another member of the ruling class, assembles a fabulous pile of wealth, and sends him off. This is a government mission; there is no mention of the prophet! Israel's King seems to have forgotten about him too. The letter, and the grand entourage, makes him paranoid. Naaman beat him once, this must surely be a quarrelsome gesture. The prophet comes to the rescue of the King, but he was not summoned to do so. He had to interpose himself! It is sometimes the role of clergy to interfere with the government. Thanks to Elisha the king avoids having mud on his face. But Elisha did not do this for the king's sake: it was for the sake of God whose herald was a slave girl in a foreign land. Because of her, the grace of God reached new territory and another life was healed and brought to faith.

The scene outside Elisha's house is worthy of a Monty Python movie. Naaman rides up with his men and chariots only to suffer what seems to be a rebuff. Elisha adopts a minimalist approach, perhaps because God is unpretentious and this is not about working wonders. There is no grand entry of a miraculous healer; no spectacular gestures; and then the relayed message is - wash seven times in the Jordan. Naaman is incensed, a scungy old foreign river! Once again help comes from the servants who talk sense: "It's not complicated - just do it!"

We know the outcome, but what are we to make of it? Our question is "how did this happen?" but that is not the point of the story. This is a story about how God's grace is present in all the world and how faith comes about. Much like the tax collectors and sinners who came to Jesus, Naaman is a foreigner and a social outcast in dire need; the power of death is creeping over him. He responds to the lowly servant girl's disclosure: Israel's God holds the power of life. The irony is, even Naaman's success against Israel is part of the power and sovereignty of this God. It brought into his house the one who showed him the path to new life, which cannot be obtained through victories, position or wealth. It is purely his receptivity to the servant girl's disclosure, and his willingness to undergo a baptism like washing in the Jordan river, that brings him healing, and far deeper healing, which is faith in God.

Like the three kings who attend Jesus's birth, Naaman has to return to his original context where a different god is served. He takes with him some of Israel's soil. No wiping off of the dust here! This is humus, symbol for the ground of new faith that, from now on, will grow in him. But he takes more than that. He takes the Peace of God - the most important thing any of us can have.

The good news of this story is that God's grace is able to reach us, even when death creeps over us, or we are confined to unfaithful contexts - for God is the God of all and God's grace knows no restrictions. It crosses boundaries, goes into new territories, speaks through the lowly and confronts the mighty for one purpose: to show that God receives and accepts us, and offers to us all the gift of life in all its fulness.