

# The Catholic Parish of Petworth & Midhurst West Sussex

Fr Peter's Homily for 28<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time (Year C)  
8<sup>th</sup> October 2022

It is the 9<sup>th</sup> century BC. The people of Israel and the people of Syria, to the north of them, are engaged in an ongoing struggle, skirmishing and nibbling away at one another's kingdoms. Very significant among the Syrians is Naaman, the commander of the army who has brought so much success in battle. But Naaman has a problem. He is suffering from a disfiguring paleness of skin, which is usually translated as leprosy but, whatever it was, it was very disfiguring.

During one of the successful attacks on Israel, Naaman had carried off a young girl who is now working for his wife as a servant. The girl sees her master's paleness and says to her mistress 'It is a pity my master doesn't go to the prophet Elisha, he would heal him of his disease'. The story gets taken to Naaman, who tells it to the Syrian king. Already the story sounds a bit odd: would the prophet really heal one of the chief persecutors of the people?

Anyway the Syrian king agrees – yes, go off and see the prophet, I'll write to the king of Israel with a letter of recommendation, and so he does: 'I have sent you my servant Naaman, for you to heal him'. Perhaps it isn't a surprise that the King of Israel panics – 'who am I to heal a man of skin blanch, this is just looking for an excuse to come and attack me!' Elisha hears about it and tells the king to send Naaman to him 'that he may know there is a prophet in Israel' – lets show him where God really lives. Naaman comes with horses and chariots and wagon loads of gold and silver, and waits outside Elisha's house. Picture the scene: all that gold and silver, all the servants and the guards and the fine clothes, and the great man waiting outside the house. Then a messenger appears: 'Elisha says go and bathe seven times in the river Jordan and all will be well'. Naaman is furious. He has come all this way, and waited outside the house of the holy man, but the holy man doesn't even bother to appear, he just sends a message by his servant. Naaman wanted a voice of power speaking in God's name, and a wave of the hand over the afflicted skin to summon God's power, and all he is asked to do is go and wash in the local rather feeble river – why not the great rivers that meet at Damascus? It is all very disappointing, Naaman had hoped so much and it seems as if his trip has been a waste of time. Just for a moment it looks as if the great man's pride will stand in the way of his healing.

But, just as it was a captured servant girl that first put the idea into Naaman's head, now it is his own servants who run after him and call him back. Just think, for a moment. Perhaps this is how God really works, perhaps he can accomplish great things through simple actions. Why not try? And so Naaman swallows his pride, and bathes in the Jordan, and his skin becomes once again like the skin of a young boy. Naaman, however, does not go back to Syria, not yet. He returns to Elisha's house, and stands before the prophet, acknowledges with humility the power of the living God, and offers Elisha gifts, gifts which Elisha will not take: healing and salvation, after all are neither costly nor cheap, they are free. Elisha has everything he needs, he has Naaman's conversion, so thorough that he will not even go home without some soil of Israel on which to worship. From refusing to bathe in Israel's feeble little river, now Naaman will not even go home unless he has Israelite soil on which to stand to worship God. What a wonderful change. Elisha has, indeed, shown that there is a prophet in Israel and Naaman goes back with his treasure untouched, but with his body healed and his soul saved. His trust in the message of a humble servant girl has been amply repaid.

We are a people of stories, and the story of Naaman and Elisha is a part of our story. It features a servant girl who is not afraid to speak to her mistress of the things of God; a king who is anxious and insecure, frightened into a misunderstanding because he is so scared of losing his throne; it features Naaman, who starts off proud and self-important, but who at least has enough of a chink of humility and self-awareness that he lets God's grace in; and a servant who has the courage to tell his master off and who, in effect, bursts open the door that lets God's power go to work. And, of course, it features a prophet who offers healing and salvation in just the perfect way, the way that demands a choice, demands a decision, demands a real conversion. Naaman learnt from Elisha that salvation requires humility. He had to forget about the treasure – no one was interested in that; he has to forget about all the bowing and scraping and 'aren't you a wonderful general' because no-one was interested in that either; he even has to take off the armour and fine clothes that defined who he was, and appear humbly before God, bare and undefended. Whoever we are, whatever we have, whatever we have achieved, we are all Naaman; we all baulk at God's simplicity. He doesn't ask us to be heroes – not most of us, anyway – he asks us to be humble.