

TRINITY XVII 2019 (P23/280T)

Very often when I am pondering a Biblical text when writing a sermon, I find that I am led down all sorts of paths of discovery – some very surprising indeed. Both the Old Testament and Gospel passages today deal with leprosy, so I began to think about the various ways in which we refer to skin in everyday conversation. We use different phrases: ‘beauty is only skin-deep,’ ‘they’re not comfortable in their own skin,’ ‘you’re getting under my skin,’ usually associations which tend to be negative (although Cole Porter comes up with a more attractive thought in one of his songs!)

The story of Naaman is one of the most attractive in the cycle of stories about the prophet Elisha. I don’t know about you, but Elijah always seems a more sympathetic person to his successor. Elijah is full of foibles. He faces kingly power, but then runs away after triumph. He even tries to run away from God, but with fiery horses and chariot is borne aloft to his heavenly resting place. Elisha, meanwhile, gets upset when some children call him ‘baldhead,’ who are then mauled by she-bears when he curses them! It’s not a good image. Perhaps I am being unfair to him, but it is noticeable that he is detached in the way he deals with many of the situations he is involved in. Even in the story of Naaman he is off-hand and almost disdainful. Yet God works through him – there is hope for us all!

The vividness of the story enables us to empathise with Naaman. There are also touching details which draw us into the action. The scene involving his wife and the captured Israelite slave girl talks to us of the way in which hope can enter any situation. The girl uses the encounter to promote God above those of Aram! We have the interactions between the two kings; one more powerful than the other, hence the panic of the Israelite king when he is asked a favour by the Aramean monarch! The set scene where Naaman sweeps into town with his chariots, horses and servants, points to his own power. He has brought riches with him, and yet Elisha doesn’t even come out of the house to see him. Elisha’s servant Gehazi comes out to tell Naaman to wash in the Jordan seven times to be healed. Such is the disdain, it’s no wonder that Naaman loses his temper and calls the Jordan not much more than a muddy ditch compared to the rivers in Aram! It is only his rather cheeky servants who goad him into doing what Elisha has messaged via his servant Gehazi.

When Naaman’s healing is accomplished the humble gratitude he expresses is very touching. He recognises the power of God and even offers riches to the prophet. There is no lingering resentment at the way in which he has been treated. In fact, both he and his own servants seem to come out of this account with more honour than Elisha and Gehazi. Elisha seems to want abject gratitude and acknowledgement that he is in the right, whilst Gehazi comes unstuck spectacularly over greed later in the account.

Naaman’s humbling and affecting response make a good pairing with our Gospel reading; the gratitude shown to Jesus by the Samaritan leper matching that of the Aramean. However, the circumstances are very different. The leprosy of Naaman has not cut him off from his people in the way Jewish sufferers were through the Mosaic Law. The lepers in Luke lived on the absolute margins of society, restricted in every aspect of their lives. Theirs was a desperate existence wholly reliant on the charity of others. Their cries of desperation are met with compassion in the face of Jesus Christ, and their healing points to

the overwhelming desire of God to reveal divine compassion which is capable of bring healing to every situation. However, it is a two-way process.

The one who returns to give thanks to Jesus is someone beyond the pale even more than the other lepers – he's a foreigner; a despised Samaritan. Yet of all ten he is the one who returns to Jesus in gratitude. We can see the main difference between the two accounts. Elisha's play of divine power contrasts unfavourably against the words of Jesus, 'Get up and go on your way; your **faith** has made you well.' Although all ten are healed, it is the faith of the Samaritan leper which speaks to us of the fulness of life to be found in Jesus.

Jesus to treat the Samaritan leper as an equal – there is no bar at any level of his relationship with God or humanity. The man is whole – no 'ifs' or 'buts' – his onward journey is one of wholeness through faith: *'Go on your way; your faith has made you well.'* The leper has the *'knowledge of salvation,'* which Luke speaks of at the start of his Gospel in the words of the Benedictus. *In the tender compassion of our God, the day spring from on high will break upon us, to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace.'* (Luke 1: 77-9)

This is the assurance at the heart of our Faith. Not that everything will be perfect, or that we won't suffer in any way, or that the things which can afflict any and everyone will be ameliorated, but that at the deepest level of our spiritual journey, wholeness is ours through faith in God who loves us so much that Jesus shared our earthly journey and that his light is with us even when we sit in darkness or the shadow of death. We are never alone. This assurance is unbreakable. When Jesus says, 'But the other nine, where are they?', this seems to me not so much criticism but an open invitation to be drawn to the fulness of life.

With the current febrile nature of debate surrounding situations like Gay, Trans and so many other types of identity issues, much seems to be made of persona worked out at just one level of our nature. I don't take away from deeply felt issues, but much of what we hear seems to me to be problematical, because it is living at skin-level only. If we do this then we miss out on the fulness of life which lies at the heart of our Faith.

John Bradburne was born in Cumberland in the early 1920s, the son of a vicar and his wife. He had a typical upbringing of the time and at the outbreak of war volunteered for the Indian army. After a religious experience in Malaysia, he returned to England where he became a Roman Catholic in 1947. Feeling a strong urge to travel as a pilgrim, he did so for the next 17 years through Europe and the Middle East with not much more than a Gladstone bag!

This travelling came to an end in 1962 when a Jesuit priest friend called him as a missionary helper to Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe). In 1969 he found a leper colony 90 miles from Harare. It was a cut off community of 80 leprosy sufferers abandoned by others. Here Bradburne felt his call staying with these patients and caring for them as their warden, fending off rats which inhabited the living quarters, and helping them to build a church and to make music. He fell out with the Leprosy Association who wanted the lepers to be known by numbers rather than names but John, the most prolific poet in the English

language, had written individual poems about each person in the colony. He was expelled but stayed in a tin hut just outside the perimeter fence, continuing to minister selflessly.

In 1979 civil war raged in Zimbabwe and although warned to leave, he refused to forsake the lepers he cared for. Robert Mugabe's guerrillas abducted him, humiliating him in terrible ways before subsequently shooting and killing him – a needless act for someone who had truly lived life to the fullest in serving a leper colony who revered him.

He wrote these words about his leper friends:

*Dance me down, Fortune - saw I not this very morn
Aristocratic spirits in their smitten frames
Go nobly on with living?*

This noble living is the self-same gift we are all called to through Faith – not living skin-deep but knowing the call to the **fullness** of life found in Jesus Christ. God can't love you anymore deeply than he does at this minute in time. It is a love which is unbreakable and at the very core of our being, so I ask a question. What is your response in revealing the knowledge of this to the world?



2 Kings 5: 1-3, 7-15

5 Naaman, commander of the army of the king of Aram, was a great man and in high favour with his master, because by him the Lord had given victory to Aram. The man, though a mighty warrior, suffered from leprosy.^[a] ² Now the Arameans on one of their raids had taken a young girl captive from the land of Israel, and she served Naaman's wife. ³ She said to her mistress, 'If only my lord were with the prophet who is in Samaria! He would cure him of his leprosy.'⁷ When the king of Israel read the letter, he tore his clothes and said, 'Am I God, to give death or life, that this man sends word to me to cure a man of his leprosy? Just look and see how he is trying to pick a quarrel with me.'

⁸ But when Elisha the man of God heard that the king of Israel had torn his clothes, he sent a message to the king, 'Why have you torn your clothes? Let him come to me, that he may learn that there is a prophet in Israel.'⁹ So Naaman came with his horses and chariots, and halted at the entrance of Elisha's house.

¹⁰ Elisha sent a messenger to him, saying, 'Go, wash in the Jordan seven times, and your flesh shall be restored and you shall be clean.'¹¹ But Naaman became angry and went away, saying, 'I thought that for me

he would surely come out, and stand and call on the name of the Lord his God, and would wave his hand over the spot, and cure the leprosy! ¹² Are not Abana and Pharpar, the rivers of Damascus, better than all the waters of Israel? Could I not wash in them, and be clean?' He turned and went away in a rage. ¹³ But his servants approached and said to him, 'Father, if the prophet had commanded you to do something difficult, would you not have done it? How much more, when all he said to you was, "Wash, and be clean"?' ¹⁴ So he went down and immersed himself seven times in the Jordan, according to the word of the man of God; his flesh was restored like the flesh of a young boy, and he was clean.

¹⁵ Then he returned to the man of God, he and all his company; he came and stood before him and said, 'Now I know that there is no God in all the earth except in Israel;

2 Timothy 2: 8-15

⁸ Remember Jesus Christ, raised from the dead, a descendant of David—that is my gospel, ⁹ for which I suffer hardship, even to the point of being chained like a criminal. But the word of God is not chained.

¹⁰ Therefore I endure everything for the sake of the elect, so that they may also obtain the salvation that is in Christ Jesus, with eternal glory. ¹¹ The saying is sure:

If we have died with him, we will also live with him;

¹² if we endure, we will also reign with him;

if we deny him, he will also deny us;

¹³ if we are faithless, he remains faithful—

for he cannot deny himself.

¹⁴ Remind them of this, and warn them before God^[a] that they are to avoid wrangling over words, which does no good but only ruins those who are listening. ¹⁵ Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved by him, a worker who has no need to be ashamed, rightly explaining the word of truth.

Luke 17: 11-19

¹¹ On the way to Jerusalem Jesus was going through the region between Samaria and Galilee. ¹² As he entered a village, ten lepers approached him. Keeping their distance, ¹³ they called out, saying, 'Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!' ¹⁴ When he saw them, he said to them, 'Go and show yourselves to the priests.' And as they went, they were made clean. ¹⁵ Then one of them, when he saw that he was healed, turned back, praising God with a loud voice. ¹⁶ He prostrated himself at Jesus' feet and thanked him. And he was a Samaritan. ¹⁷ Then Jesus asked, 'Were not ten made clean? But the other nine, where are they?

¹⁸ Was none of them found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner?' ¹⁹ Then he said to him, 'Get up and go on your way; your faith has made you well.'