

October 9 2022, St Brandon's
17: 11-19

2 Kings 5: 1-3, 7-15; Luke

Compare and contrast....

Is that a phrase that takes you back to exam papers – for some of us decades ago, for others maybe far more recent?

This morning we're going to *compare and contrast* the two 'related' readings we've just heard, as set by the lectionary. Do have your readings sheet to hand as I move about a bit between the two stories.

I want to highlight four of the similarities, parallels which help the readings to reinforce each other. They also contain differences, divergences which raise a few questions.. Here we go!

Firstly, both today's stories of healing happen in places on the margins, in the borderlands.

in our first reading, Naaman the Syrian (Aram is modern day Syria) has been successful in one of the frequent battles at that time between Israel and her northern neighbours. Note that the writer attributes this victory to the Lord, who is not just Israel's God but God of all the nations. Naaman also has a slave girl, working for his wife, who was captured from Israel in a *border* raid.

Meanwhile in the gospel reading, Jesus is walking through the borderlands between Samaria and Galilee, as he often did, when he meets the ten lepers.

Secondly, in both accounts it is **leprosy** which is healed. Leprosy in biblical times was a banner term for all unpleasant and contagious skin conditions, dreaded because it was so easily transmitted and often incurable, leading to disfigurement and disability. Our recent experiences of COVID can give us insight into this, that when people sense they're at risk, sufferers are isolated and excluded, behaviour becomes more extreme and fear spreads fast. Leprosy was the COVID of Jesus's day, with no vaccines.

The ten lepers who meet Jesus are members of a known but marginalised community outside the town, but Naaman's leprosy, by contrast, is hidden, largely by the luxury of privacy which his wealth

affords him. Fine clothes and the armour of a military commander would have hidden Naaman's condition from all but his inner circle. As one of the King's favourites, he wouldn't have risked it being known at court, so the stakes are high. We don't know where Naaman caught leprosy, were he in a soap opera the back story might be fascinating! Naaman inhabits a world where appearance and reputation matter. Admitting his condition to his boss the King of Aram is the first step for his healing. And living in the court, he assumes the King will answer his problem, not an unknown prophet in Samaria! In verses which our reading misses out, the King of Aram send Naaman with a letter and lavish gifts to the King of Israel, whose explosive response we heard: *Am I God, to give death or life, that this man sends word to me to cure a man of his leprosy?* Only then, finally, does Elisha hear what's going on.

Here's our third parallel: throughout the Bible, **healing of leprosy is a sign of God's kingdom** – evidence of God's power beyond human comprehension and control. Naaman's Jewish slave girl knows this: she's bold and honest enough to name his illness, caring enough to suggest a risky plan. She's experienced the power of God and knows about 'the prophet in Samaria' who is Elisha, successor to the great prophet Elijah. Captive as she is, the girl hasn't abandoned her faith or Jewish identity. When Elisha finally hears of Naaman's condition, he says 'Let him come to me, that he may learn that there is a prophet in Israel'.

Elisha lives to proclaim God's rule –this healing will be more than a personal solution for Naaman, it will be a sign that the LORD is King over all.

Likewise, the gospels record several stories of Jesus healing lepers, as Old Testament prophecy is fulfilled in his ministry. Jesus' healings challenge religious rules and social norms, through his courage and compassion.

But primarily, the healings are signs that God's kingdom has come in Jesus.

Back in chapter 7 of Luke, John the Baptist sends his disciples to check if Jesus really is 'the one who is to come' - the Messiah who will bring in God's kingdom. Jesus replies: *'Go and tell John what you have seen and*

*heard: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, **the lepers are cleansed**, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, the poor have good news brought to them. ²³ And blessed is anyone who takes no offence at me.'* Note Jesus' final comment, 'blessed is *anyone* who takes no offence at me.'

Everyone is included in Jesus' ministry, *everyone* welcome, everyone offered healing, new life, the chance to receive and believe the good news. And through the healing of untouchables, outcasts, no-hopers, *lepers*, that message becomes reality.

So, onto our **fourth** parallel. In both stories, it is a **foreigner** who gives thanks to God – the God of all the nations. Faith and healing, indeed the Kingdom of God, are not for the Jewish people alone. Naaman's seven-fold washing in the Jordan is a prophetic baptism, cleansing him from disease and sin, bringing him new life, as he professes:

'Now I know that there is no God in all the earth except in Israel.'

In the gospel it's also the foreigner, the Samaritan, who 'returns' to Jesus, in an act resonant of repentance – 'Return to the Lord who will have mercy'. He prostrates himself in worship and gives thanks to God: signs of spiritual wholeness beyond the physical healing he's received. Jesus tells the Samaritan to 'get up and go on your way' the 'get up' is a word also used of resurrection. Jesus has given him new life, in all its fulness.

The other nine lepers are 'made clean', but since they don't return and give praise to God, perhaps they're not *fully* healed in the same way, though their experience may lead to faith later on, or to further encounters with Jesus.

Four parallels- there are more but my time's nearly up! Lets recap:

Both stories happen on the margins, and Elisha is even found on the wrong side of the border, in Samaria.

Both tell of healing from leprosy, with all its stigma and fear.

Both clearly show this healing as a sign of God's kingdom.

Finally, Naaman the Syrian and the Samaritan leper are both foreigners, showing that God's kingdom is for all nations and people.

Well this isn't an exam essay but a sermon,
so what do we take away from all this comparing and contrasting?
I hope something's struck you, that you will reflect on today and into this week!

For me, I think it's this:

God chooses to work in unlikely places and through unexpected people:

- a faithful slave girl speaks truth to power, resulting in healing and faith for her enemy
- a foreign leper begs for healing and is given life, hope and a future
- a church member donates anonymously to DASH at Harvest and the recipient receives not just food but affirmation, hope and love.
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Let's look out this week for God at work in places and people we *don't* expect, whether in the challenges we face in our own neighbourhood and nation,

or as we respond to crises and emergencies across the world.

God is at work in places and people we don't expect,

for no one and nothing is beyond the reach of God's love.