

Sermon

Sunday 9 October, 2016

Lessons 2 Kings 5: 1 – 3, 7 – 15 2 Timothy 2: 8 - 15 St Luke 17: 11 – 19

Prayer of Illumination

Let us pray.

Beyond our best definitions, Holy God, Mystery that we encounter in stillness, only when words fail do we step onto holy ground, Eternity's silence; only in the darkness do we see You. Bless our meditations. Amen.

With his familiar disarming smile and a sparkle in his eyes, the Dalai Lama said, 'I have many rich friends and, I think, most of them are unhappy.' In contrast to the unhappiness of some of his friends, the Tibetan spiritual leader radiates light and joy. Within the Christian tradition, one of the greatest spiritual writers of our time is the American Franciscan friar Richard Rohr. Much of Rohr's writing is an exploration of the inner life, of discovering the Divine within us, in the soul and at the core of our very being. Listen to his words:

We live in a society that places great importance upon external signs of success. We have to assure ourselves and others that we are valuable and important—because we inherently doubt that we are! Thus we are often preoccupied with [one-upmanship]. I am afraid that most lose in such a 'winner-takes-all' society. We have great difficulty finding our inherent value with such a world view. Few have deep conviction about their own soul or the Indwelling Holy Spirit.

Happiness, says Rohr, is an inside job. This is the paradox of materialism: 'the more we project our soul's longing onto things, the more things disappoint us.' The wisdom of the Church, the teachings of the mystics and saints, is that the more we saturate ourselves in the Sacred, allow ourselves to be absorbed into the Absolute, into the Mystery we call God, the more we let go of status, privilege and wealth. Slowly, our worship of the world, of material things, ebbs away. In this life, most of us are never truly free of these idols but we can at least make the effort to free ourselves from their attraction and power.

If I were asked what faith has to offer the contemporary world, I would answer nothingness, emptiness, silence. In the frenetic busyness of everyday life, to creatures – human beings – who are mixed up, with issues and uncertainties, fears and failures, divided loyalties and illness, fragility more than strength and competence, I would offer nothingness, emptiness, silence: the nothingness, emptiness and silence of God. At its best, faith offers a doorway into the Divine, a place of rest, of seeing further, of acceptance and welcome. Faith does not mean memorising ancient creeds or

doctrines; it means encountering the Mystery, the Sacred, the Transcendent in the present moment.

In our Old Testament story this morning we hear the account of Naaman, an Aramean army commander, a mighty warrior, who suffers from leprosy. At the behest of an Israelite slave, Naaman travels to Samaria to meet a Jewish prophet named Elisha. The commander hopes that Elisha will be able to heal him of his leprosy. In a grand show of pomp, with horses and chariots, Naaman ostentatiously arrives at the home of the prophet. Rather than meet him face to face, Elisha sends a messenger to Naaman with the instruction, 'Go, wash in the Jordan seven times, and your flesh shall be restored and you shall be clean.' At first, Naaman is offended that the prophet has not bothered to greet him in person but finally the Aramean goes to the river. Seven times Naaman immerses himself in the water and, we are told, 'his flesh was restored like the flesh of a young boy, and he was clean.'

Is this a miracle story? Did the waters of the Jordan cure a man of his leprosy? Was it the word of Elisha, the command from a prophet

of God, which healed the army commander? How do we reconcile such a claim with our scientific knowledge about disease?

This story is not about the miraculous cure of a debilitating physical skin disease. It is very unlikely that the Hebrew and Greek words used for the skin disease relate to modern-day leprosy but, even if they do, the cure of a physical disease is not the point of the Naaman story. In the Old Testament, there are a number of similar stories in which individuals are cursed by a dreaded skin disease. In the Book of Numbers, Miriam, the sister of Moses, is punished by God for challenging the authority of Moses: in an instant, her skin is covered by disease and she is unable to return to the community for seven days. In the Book of Samuel, Joab, who commits murder, is cursed by King David, and his skin becomes diseased. In the Book of Chronicles, King Uzziah arrogantly defies God by burning incense on an altar in the Temple, in a holy place where he was not entitled to be. In a moment, the disease appears on the face of the king and he is no longer permitted to enter the Temple; he dies alone. In the Book of Kings, immediately after the story of Naaman, Gehazi is cursed by the disease of Naaman for being an unfaithful Jew. The

dreaded skin disease is not leprosy, not as we understand the word. It is a metaphor for a broken relationship with God.

If the word 'leprosy is not what it seems, neither is the word 'flesh'.

In the Bible, the word 'flesh' is used to mean different things. On occasion, it may mean the physical matter of our body, the skin and muscles which cling to our bones. On most occasions, however, 'flesh' means the whole person, who we are: body, mind and spirit.

In the Bible, flesh is not sinful. Flesh is good: we are made in the image of God. Crucially, we are dependent upon God. And here's the rub: in all the cases I've mentioned, Naaman, Gehazi, Miriam, Joab and Uzziah are all people whose arrogance, whose elevation of self, took them above themselves, above others and above God. To my mind, the skin disease is an outward metaphor of a soul deformed, defaced by the ugliness of the ego, the small self.

In the healing of Naaman, the Early Church saw the suggestion of baptism: Naaman is cleansed of all that deformed his soul and he leaves the home of Elisha in a healthy relationship with God, with humility and an honest appreciation of who he is. St Paul too tells us that we must wrestle ourselves free from the demons within, the

satanic forces in which we seek to lord it over others. Only if we live from the Spirit, from the Eternal, die to self, will we gain a right perspective on who we are. Implicit in the Naaman story is the fact that Naaman is not a Jew yet, once healed, a healing in which he participates, he is held up as an example, a man cherished by God. God is blind to nationality; an important message for our time.

In the Gospel of St Luke, we read the story of ten men suffering from leprosy who come to Jesus to be healed. While approaching Jesus, though they keep their distance, the men cry out for mercy. Jesus tells the men to 'Go and show themselves to the priests.' It was the priests who admitted and re-admitted people into the community. As the men went on their way, we are told that they are made clean. Of the ten, one man returns to thank Jesus and offer praise to God. He bows down, prostrates himself at the feet of Jesus. Jesus tells the man, 'Get up and go on your way; your faith has made you well.'

On the face of it, as if by magic, Jesus healed ten men suffering from a dreaded skin disease. He spoke a word and their physical deformity was gone. Is this the stuff of superstition? As in the story of Naaman, we need to understand is that in the Bible leprosy is rarely a

condition of the skin. It is a metaphor: it is a disease of the soul. Throughout His ministry, Jesus spoke repeatedly of union with God, of being at one with the One who is already within us. The story of the ten lepers is to do with finding inner peace in this world, wholeness which this material world cannot give.

In the Gospel story, one man returned to Jesus to offer thanks. We are told that he bowed down, he prostrated himself at the feet of Jesus. This is not demeaning, servile behaviour. It is an outward symbol of an inner reality: it is the overcoming of the ego, the false self, in order that we are free to live in the presence of God. It is an explicit acknowledgment that this world is not our home and, letting go, we find our fulfillment in the emptiness of God. The ego can be destructive, selfish and arrogant. Prostrating oneself is a symbol of overcoming those inner demons and desires.

Let me close with some words of Rohr. Here the friar is reflecting on the life of St Francis of Assisi and, in particular, the moment Francis kissed a man suffering from leprosy. Rohr writes:

When Francis said, after kissing the leper, 'I left the world,' he was saying that he was giving up on the usual payoffs, constraints, and rewards of business-as-usual and was

choosing to live in the largest Kingdom of all. To pray and actually mean 'Thy Kingdom come,' we must also be able to say 'my kingdoms go.'

Time is *not* money, despite the common aphorism. Time is life itself! When you agree to live simply, people cease to be possessions and objects for your consumption or use. Your lust for relationships or for others to serve you, your need for admiration, your desire to use people or things as commodities for your personal pleasure, or any need to control and manipulate others, slowly....falls away. Only then are you free to love.

At its best, faith is about the transformation of this life, of living more fulfilled lives in this lifetime and of finding the peace, the solace, that only God within can give.

Amen.