

The Power of a Simple Testimony

“It’s 11.07 on day 10 in the Celebrity Big Brother house, and Naaman is talking about his plans for when he leaves the house. He’s going to see a faith healer in Israel who he hopes will rid him of his skin disease once and for all.”

I imagine you are probably familiar with that wretched Big Brother programme on TV, where people are thrown together in a house and are filmed 24/7 – indeed I gather it began in the Netherlands, so the Netherlands have much to answer for! It came to mind when pondering the story of Naaman, because it seems that he would make such a prime candidate for the show. He has everything the producers are looking for. He’s a war hero, a commander of a successful army and therefore a man of great power, and we all know that power is the great aphrodisiac. He’s a huge celebrity. We’re used to seeing his face at press conferences where the latest military propaganda regarding the Syrian army is dished out. Naaman is no half-forgotten fading star like so many of his companions in the house. This man is hot. And we shall see that he is a man of great wealth, and to crown it all – he has leprosy. In other words we see in Naaman that rare combination of power and vulnerability, just the ingredients that the producers of this programme are looking for!

One person who will not be appearing in the show however is a young servant girl, an Israelite who has been captured in one of the Syrian raids on Israel, and who is now a servant to Naaman’s wife. She will not be appearing because she is of no interest to anybody. Indeed she presents a contrast to Naaman in almost every regard.

He is a powerful man. She is a young girl.

He is a commander of a victorious army. She is a prisoner of war, snatched from her people.

He is a celebrity, a man of substance. She is a slave girl who has nothing.

He is a big name. She is nameless, anonymous.

He is a man of violence. She is compassionate, seeing Naaman not as an enemy but as a suffering human being who she can direct to a source of healing.

So Naaman has everything. She, by contrast, has nothing- except for one thing She knows that there is a prophet in Samaria who would heal Naaman of his

leprosy. And it is this that gives her a strange power in this story for it is at her initiative that healing comes to Naaman. And come it will, but it will involve a journey for Naaman. It will involve a journey, and not just between Syria and the door of Elisha's house. It will involve a journey between two completely different worlds.

We catch such a fascinating insight into Naaman's world that he must leave. It's a world that we are all familiar with, one exemplified by the Big Brother house. It's a world where power and celebrity and, above all, money talk. And Naaman is locked into that world. So it is that when his wife mentions to him the possibility of healing he heads straight off to the King of Israel, wallet bulging, and laden down with a wardrobe of designer outfits: ten changes of clothing, one for every eventuality. These are the terms on which Naaman lives his life. These are the marks of the world in which he moves, with its protocols, and rituals, and etiquette. It is an exclusive world of winners and losers, of insiders and outsiders, only Naaman's problem is that he is embarrassingly compromised, tainted as he is with this degrading disease. It means he is a winner, yes – but, in those days, also a loser. It means that he is an insider, yes – but, in those days also an outsider. And Naaman the leper is therefore a symbol, a reminder, that this high-powered world is also one that is infected and disfigured. Naaman's leprosy reminds us that his world is one where death is at work, menacing, striking even those at the very top of the pile.

The prophet Elisha belongs to a completely different world. It's a marginalised world, out on the edge and far distant from the power centre of the King of Israel, far removed from the control centre which Naaman inhabits. I love verse 9 of our reading: 'So Naaman came with his horses and chariots and halted at the entrance of Elisha's house...' Surely there is something wonderfully incongruous here because I doubt there was much to Elisha's house. I doubt that it would have featured in Hello or OK magazine ('we take you on a tour of Elisha the prophet's lovely house...'). No! Here we can picture the clash between two worlds, Naaman's with his horses and chariots, parked outside Elisha's modest dwelling.

Elisha's world is unimpressed by such pomp and prestige and power. Indeed so unfazed is he by celebrity that Elisha does not even want to meet Naaman. He doesn't even deign to come to the door. He just sends a terse message, 'tell Naaman to go and jump in the river seven times and God will

heal him.’ For Elisha he is just one more diseased person and disease, like death, is a great leveller. It cuts us all down to one size, frail mortals dependent upon God for life. But Naaman of course is outraged. He wants to earn his healing. He wants to make healing one more commodity that he can buy, one more battle that he can win, one more conquest. Elisha, though, will have none of it. ‘Get you to the Jordan!’ Leave your false, inflated world and join this other, alternative world, God’s world, where that dirty river Jordan becomes the River of Life. There the rich and the mighty are cast down from their thrones and the lowly are exalted and we discover the meaning of grace.

Commentators point out one beautiful and subtle feature of this story. It’s a story that begins with the young servant girl and ends with Naaman’s the leper’s flesh becoming like a little child’s. What is significant is that the original Hebrew word for the young servant girl is essentially the same as the word for the little child’s flesh that Naaman’s skin becomes like. In other words: in this nuanced and coded way the passage is saying that Naaman becomes like the little girl. The commander of the army becomes like a young servant girl, and as he does so a whole way of ordering life is being subverted and reconfigured. Naaman’s world must be dismantled. He must move from his world into hers, journeying from one to the other.

You see, this is the point of this story. It is not just about a leper being healed. It is about a clash between two completely different worlds, two entirely different orders. It’s a stand-off between a ruthless, high-powered world on the one hand, and God’s realm on the other. It’s a contrast between a world of Naamans or a world of nameless nobodies like the captive servant girl and Elisha. It’s the alternative between a world disfigured by death and one where life surges freely and unexpectedly. And Naaman must make the move. He must make the journey from the one to the other. And that journey takes him through the murky waters of the River Jordan –and if you ever wanted a perfect picture of baptism then there you have it, the journey between two worlds that marks the beginning of our Christian life and that we are called to enact every single day of it.

The trouble is of course that the old, oppressive world, the one that has been subverted and undermined, keeps on reasserting itself. It is dominant and enduring and will not be suppressed. So, if we had read on in this narrative we would have found that Elisha has a servant and his name is Gehazi. And Gehazi cannot understand why Elisha has not taken any payment from Naaman. Is he

crazy? After all, Elisha is a poor prophet and Naaman is a rich celebrity with his chariots and his horses and his gold and his wardrobe – and Gehazi sees an opportunity here to feather his own nest. So he runs after Naaman and deceives Naaman into giving him payment. And so it is that just as Naaman is transferring his allegiance to Elisha's world, Gehazi is going in the opposite direction, signing up to Naaman's old debunked world. And Gehazi even ends up with leprosy. In other words Naaman's world reasserts itself as he and Gehazi exchange places.

How then is God's realm, the world of Elisha to prevail? How is it to succeed? Here we are in an increasingly secular culture with its worship of false gods and which seems to clash more and more with Gods' kingdom, that realm in which we try to live and in which we try to bring up our children. And increasingly we feel marginalised and powerless. In the clash of worlds, how can God's realm prevail in us?

Well, let us return to the servant girl in our story: a vulnerable young girl in an alien culture that does not worship or respect her God. Yet she is not powerless. She has the weapon of her quiet witness. She has her simple testimony to the God she knows. She has the power to speak and to act on behalf of the living God! And she therefore has power to subvert the seemingly dominant world of Naaman.

So we hear with fresh ears the words of Paul in our reading from Galatians: 'let us not grow weary in doing right, for we will reap at harvest time... whenever we have an opportunity, let us work for the good of all, especially those of the family of faith'. Those are words for us here, citizens of God's Kingdom in an alien land with our worship, and our witness; the little opportunities that God gives us to speak and to testify and to act, to chip away at the old order, little opportunities given to us every day, to be the young servant girl.

By such deceptive means God's Kingdom is advanced and other worlds are undone. Amen.

O gracious and loving God,
forever holy, forever pure,
dweller in light so dazzling
that the very angels veil their faces and turn their heads,
how do we dare to worship you?
How do we dare to turn our faces and to lift our gaze
to one whose very breath rocks the foundations of the temple?
How do we presume to come here
and to take your name upon our lips?
Yet we come joyfully and gratefully
for you have come to us in Jesus,
laying aside your glory and meeting us face to face.
O God we praise and worship you.

We bless your holy name.
Yet still we confess our sin and our shame.
Still we acknowledge the poverty of our lives
and still we look to you for forgiveness,
acknowledging our sins and failures.

O God, we rejoice that by your word of grace
we are made clean and pure,
healed and restored,
and we ask that you would fill our hearts
with such gratitude that our lives may be transformed.
And we pray these things in Jesus' name
and in the words he taught us we pray together, saying...