

*Beyond control*

Control. That is the word that come to my mind when I read about this man Naaman who we meet in our reading from the Book of 2<sup>nd</sup> Kings this morning. Naaman, after all, is used to being in control. We are told that he is commander of the army of the King of Aram, and the army of the King of Aram was pretty much in control in those days of the region that included Israel, and Naaman was its big deal military commander. And as you would expect of the commander of a powerful and successful army, this man is wealthy. We are told that when he sets off to visit the king of Israel in search of healing, he takes with him ten talents of silver, six thousand shekels of gold and ten sets of garments. That indicates considerable wealth and wealth indicates power: this man is used to directing his life according to his whims and he has the financial clout to do as he pleases.

That brings us, however, to one area of his life where Naaman is not in control, one place where he is powerless to issue orders and to see them obeyed: Naaman is sick. He has a dreaded skin disease which doubtless renders him contagious, and it probably affects his physical appearance as well. And I imagine that Naaman is grateful for the armour that he wears which hides him and which creates a barrier that enables him to mix with other people without spreading this lethal condition. But this disease is also a chink in his armour of self-sufficiency and control. It means that he is not, after all, in charge of his life. He is subject to certain rules that people with this condition must follow. He cannot go where he wants and do entirely as he pleases but is subject to certain protocols that protect others from his disease. And no matter how fit and healthy he is otherwise his body defies him when it comes to this condition. It will not do as it is told. It will not be healed. And so Naaman's leprosy marks the limits of his control over his life and his world.

Naaman, however, cannot get out of control mode. A captured Israelite servant girl tells his wife that there is a prophet in Israel who would heal him and so Naaman sets off – not to visit the prophet, however, but to go to the King of Israel because that is how people of power do things. They do not go direct to the little people like this unnamed prophet: Naaman will arrange it all with the prophet's king who the prophet will, of course, obey.

Naaman, however, is rebuffed. The king of Israel is himself a typical man of power and control: in charge and yet endlessly anxious and insecure, paranoid, suspicious and untrusting. So he suspects a plot and sends Naaman where he needs to go – direct to Elisha. And this brings us to the crunch. Elisha does not even deign to meet Naaman directly but sends a message to go and dip in the Jordan seven times. And that jars with Naaman the control freak. There are any number of rivers back home that he can dip in, and anyway, he wants to control his own healing. He wants some big task that will demonstrate his power. He wants to master his disease, to overcome it, to defeat it - what else would you expect from the commander of the army of Aram? But no, he can't do that. Here is where Naaman must submit, lay down his power and control, and let God be God. And of course the effect is that Naaman gets far more than he bargained for. Not only is his leprosy healed but he becomes a believer in the God of Israel - and receives a deeper healing and salvation.

Naaman, you see, was impervious to God. In full control mode there is no space for God in his life. Yet there is that chink in his armoury, his disease, and at that point he is opened up to God and God can reach him. And maybe this is one way the story might address us. We live, you see, with this illusion of control, this delusion that we are in charge of our lives and our world, and the modern world encourages us to strive for this. Developments in technology and in medicine encourage the belief that we master the world, and our obsession with choice is one manifestation of that – we have the power to freely choose any number of possibilities and options. But then that illusion is destroyed: a medical diagnosis, a betrayal by someone we thought we trusted, a bereavement, a financial collapse, an addiction, the effects of age and the diminishing of our abilities: maybe these are the chinks in our armoury, the cracks where God reaches us and calls us to submit, to yield, and to recognise that we are not in charge as we thought. Maybe these are invitations to open up to God who most certainly does not want to control us but only to love us – for true love is never control.

All of which brings us to today, to this table and to these gifts of bread and wine. However much power and control we may exercise in our lives, here we can only submit, and receive, as Naaman did. As he came to the river to be cleansed so we come to the table to be fed. So come, and know that you are loved, and yield your delusions of control to the one whose only power over you is the power of love. To whom be glory and praise forever. Amen.

Almighty, loving and gracious God,  
Creator of heaven and earth,  
Saviour come among us in Jesus of Nazareth,  
Spirit who opens up our spirits to your love and grace,  
we worship and praise and bless you!  
We gather here in your presence,  
You who we depend upon for life,  
You who we depend upon for all that sustains life,  
You before whom we submit and bow  
in reverence and worship.  
And God we come here to be cleansed,  
for we acknowledged that our lives are impure;  
and we come here to be healed,  
for we confess that there is a sickness deep in our souls;  
and we come here to be fed,  
for we are hungry for the bread of life  
that only you can give.  
So come, living God ,  
and wash us clean from our sins,  
and heal us and make us whole by your love,  
and meet us here is bread and wine,  
that we might be raised to new life and set free  
to live with you as our God and with Jesus Christ  
as our Saviour and Lord,  
in whose words we pray together, saying...