

## Healing and faith

St Philip's Anglican Church, O'Connor

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*2 Kings 5.1-14, Psalm 30, 1 Cor. 9.24-27, Mk 1.40-45*

Our question in this epiphany season is. "Who is this Jesus person?"

Jesus has many facets and in Mark, the earliest gospel written, he is many things; he is mystic, wisdom teacher, healer and social prophet. Any one of those roles would be enough for a thousand sermons but today I am interested in Jesus as healer. There are two accounts of healing in today's readings. Both are the healing of two different types of men and both have leprosy.

Namaan is one of the most powerful people in the land. He is at the centre of court life. He commands thousands of men. Life and death are at his fingertips. Naaman was able to find healing because he had the right connections. He knew the right people. He knew two kings and the main religious leader of his time. They were extraordinarily powerful people to know. It would be like someone in the Australia knowing Julia Gillard, Barack Obama and George Pell, or Philip Aspinall—depending on your leanings.

The leper on the other hand, is one of the least powerful people in the land. If Naaman is right in the centre, the leper is right at the margins. The leper did not need any connections at all; he simply needed to believe and ask for help. He did not need to approach two kings and get their support and help. He just needed some faith and some courage.

When we read these two accounts together they tell us that it doesn't matter who you are, how much power and influence you have, or where you come from, pain and grief, dis-ease, suffering will come to each and every one of us. The Queensland communities whose lives have been shattered by the floods know this all too well. But it does not take a natural disaster for this truth to be self-evident. We just need to look at our own lives and those nearest to us.

But if it is true that suffering comes to all, it is true that healing is possible for all. I don't mean that we are miraculously healed of our diseases. We know that does not always happen and it is more rare than common. We all have experiences of praying for God to do something, to help us or to help those we love. I suspect we all have been on our knees crying to God in desperation that he would bring healing.

And it does not happen, at least how we would like. I am sure that more than a few people in Queensland prayed that the rising waters would move in the other direction and their homes and loved ones would be dry and safe, yet the waters rose relentlessly.

I mean that despite the suffering, the darkness and loss, there is the chance of something else. I would say that if we turn to God there is the certainty that there will be a healing of our loss and grief. There will be a new beginning, a new hope.

We find that this healing, this new life, is made more possible by two things:

1. We have to ask for help: pretty obvious but it is amazing how often we struggle along without asking for assistance. We basically need to let go and give up and reach out. Naaman finally did that. The leper certainly did. (E.g. friend with addiction). When we ask God for help it is like we are turning a switch. It sets in motion a whole other dynamic, the universal dynamic of wholeness. So ask.

2. Secondly we need to have faith. We need to have faith that this asking will actually achieve something.

Faith is a very misunderstood concept in our religion. Tragically it has been used to bludgeon people into belief. We hear, “If only you had more faith, then you or those around you would be healed” or “You don’t have enough faith, that’s why this terrible thing has happened to you”. This is all ridiculous. God does not work on quantities. Look at Namaan. He barely had any faith, any belief, any hope, but God worked with what he did have. Faith is much more than agreeing to a set of propositions and being able to recite the creed convincingly. Faith is about trust, a radical trust in God.

Marcus Borg writes that faith is like floating in a deep ocean. How many of you have taught a small child to swim?<sup>1</sup> What was the biggest hurdle? Cast your minds back and think about the experience. The biggest hurdle is getting the little one to relax.

You cannot do anything with an anxious, fearful, wriggling child. Faith is trusting in the buoyancy of God, a God who surrounds us and holds us up.

It is trusting in the sea of being in which we live and move and have our being. If we are anxious and worry it is almost impossible to be helped. Perhaps this is why Jesus talked about not worrying and looking to the birds and flowers for an example of how to trust. Just let go and be.

Another image is of God as our rock and fortress. He is the one on whom we rely, our support and safe place. The opposite of trust is not doubt and disbelief but distrust.

Faith is also faithfulness, faithfulness to our relationship with God. It means loyalty, allegiance, the commitment of the self at its deepest level, the commitment of the heart. What is truly grace filled is that God remains faithful to us even though we go off chasing after other lovers. God remains constant even though we flip flop about according to the weather, our mood and the next sparkly thing that is dangled in front of our eyes.

And finally faith is about vision. It is about how we see the world. There is a vast difference between seeing the world as either hostile and threatening or perhaps just indifferent to seeing it as life giving and nourishing. If we see the world as dark and dangerous it is almost impossible to trust but if we see the world as filled with wonder and beauty, even if sometimes a terrible beauty, it can lead to radical trust. If we see the world as being full of the goodness of God then when God shows up that’s what we will see.

I love this joke about the bloke who prayed to God. You have probably heard it. (It is no commentary on what is happening in Queensland, it just happens to fit as an example.)

There once was a flood and everyone had reached safety except for one man. He climbed to the top of his house with the water lapping at his feet.

A helicopter flew over his head and hung down a rope for him to climb, but the man was deeply religious and said, “It’s alright! The Lord will save me!”

So the helicopter flew away. The water continued to rise and a boat came to him but, once again, the man shouted, “No! Go AWAY! The Lord will come and save me!” and, once again, the boat sped off.

The water was getting dangerously deep by now so the helicopter came back and, on cue, the man repeated, “I don’t need saving! My Lord will come.”

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<sup>1</sup> Examples and the four aspects of faith taken from Marcus Borg, *The heart of Christianity*.

Reluctantly, the helicopter left. The rain continued to pour, the water continued to rise and the man drowned. At the gates of heaven, the man met St. Peter. Confused, he asked, “Peter, I have lived the life of a faithful man. Why did my Lord not rescue me?”

St. Peter replied, “For pity sake! He sent you two helicopters and a boat!”

So know that God heals. Have faith, trust in God’s presence and love—it comes in many forms and ways. Let go and sink back into his loving arms. Let’s open our eyes and see that the world is a good and beautiful place. God is with us. We can trust that from the ashes of our grief will come a new beginning. Of course our memories and loss remain with us. We would not really want them gone. But God is a healing God.

God is the power that knits together emotional wounds. He is the force that is stronger than death and she will comfort and heal if we just let go and let her.

The leper had great faith. He knew beyond doubt that if Jesus chose he would be healed. Namaan had faith as well. His was a more grudging type of faith. He almost has to be dragged kicking and screaming to the Jordan. For an intelligent and capable man he put a lot of obstacles in the way. Just as well his servants and friends were watching out for him. You know sometimes we need to listen to our friends when they are suggesting we could try something to get better. They might just be right.