

28th Sunday in Ordinary Time, Year C

Fr. Samuel Springuel

9 October, 2022

1st Reading 2 Kings 5:14–17

Responsorial Psalm Psalm 98:1,2–3,3–4

2nd Reading 2 Timothy 2:8–13

Gospel Luke 17:11–19

The kingdom of Aram was at war with Israel. The border between them was constantly shifting as the two competing kingdoms sought to control the Sea of Galilee and the Jordan River to the north through Lake Huleh. Naaman was the army commander for Aram, and thus the principal architect of this war. He was, however, a leper, and despite every effort by the priests of the Aramean gods, his disease was resistant to treatment, leaving him something of an outcast. Indeed, it is a testament to Naaman's skills as a commander that he was not completely cast out from society, as most lepers were at this time. His skills were simply too valuable to the king of Aram for him to be pushed aside on account of his disease (though there were probably rivals vying for his position).

Now, Naaman lived in a time when the power of the gods was thought to be tied to the land they came from. Assyrian gods were powerful in Assyria, Egyptian gods in Egypt, Aramean gods in Aram. Outside of their territories, the gods were thought to be less powerful, if not completely impotent. Thus if one traveled long distances, whether or not you intended to return, it was necessary to learn of and worship the gods of the lands in which you were travelling. Likewise, if one wanted to worship or beg the favor of a foreign god, it was necessary to travel to the land where they held power. It is thus, that having exhausted the favors of the Aramean gods, Naaman, upon learning of the possibility of a cure for his leprosy by the power of Israel's God, travels to Israel, the land he had spent his career fighting. In setting out for this journey, he does not command an army, but appears to travel under a flag of truce, bearing a message for the King of Israel, as if he was a negotiator sent to negotiate peace between the two kingdoms.

This is the context for Naaman's request for two mule loads of earth. He is, in effect, declaring his new allegiance to Israel. Where the Aramean gods have failed him, Israel's God has granted him a cure for his leprosy, making him clean. Naaman is joyously thankful for this and resolves to worship no god but Israel's God henceforth. Since duty to his earthly lord, the King of Aram, forces him to return to that foreign soil, he wishes to take a bit of Israel with him; to transplant the land of the God who healed him onto new ground so that he might remain connected to the power which healed him. For the army commander who is the architect of Aram's ongoing conflict with Israel,

this a radical change of allegiance, one that will have significant consequences. Further, if we keep reading in the Second Book of Kings, it's clear Naaman knows this: in addition to the earth which we heard about in the reading, he goes on to ask for permission to continue to bow down like everyone else when the King of Aram offers prayers to his god. That's a pretty good indication that he doesn't plan on telling his king about his new found devotion. Still it's worth asking, what are the consequences of Naaman's conversion? Will he prosecute war against the Israelites with the same fervor? Will he advocate the King of Aram turning his ambitions in another direction and negotiating peace or even an alliance with Israel? Naaman isn't mentioned again, but the very next chapter in the Second Book of Kings tells of how in the prosecution of his war against Israel, the King of Aram is subject to a massive intelligence failure that leads to several Aramean raids on Israel being anticipated by the Israelites. Then, when the king is informed that Elisha had masterminded the foiling of these raids, he attempts to ambush Elisha and capture him. But Elisha turns the ambush on its head and captures the Aramean force without any casualties on either side. He even instructs the Israelite king to send the Aramean force back to their king after throwing them a feast. Second Kings attributes all of this to God's intervention through Elisha, but perhaps that intervention took the form of messages from the converted Naaman to the prophet who had cured his leprosy. Perhaps a secret deal was struck to defuse the tensions between the kingdoms and prevent casualties on both sides? Such an act would be considered treasonous by the Aramean king, and even if Naaman did no such thing, just the fact that he now worship's the God of Aram's enemies exclusively might be enough to warrant the death sentence for treason.

In the Gospel, Jesus is traveling through Samaria and Galilee towards Jerusalem. Given that both regions are well north of Jerusalem, with Galilee being the region further north, Jesus is likely traveling through the border region between them: the same area where Naaman would have been traveling as he sought out Elisha. In Jesus's time, the population in this area was strongly polarized into several factions. The first were the Hellenists: those aligned with the Greek and Roman powers which had ruled the area for a couple of centuries at this point. The second were the Samaritans: worshipers of Israel's God who had not gone into exile during the Assyrian and Babylonian conquests and thus traced their lineage to the peasants of the old Northern Kingdom. The third were the Jews: worshipers of Israel's God who had returned from exile in Babylon after the Persian conquest, and thus traced their lineage back to the rich and powerful of the old Southern Kingdom. Each of these factions had attitudes about the other factions which ranged from "not friendly" to "outright hostile." Within this divisive environment, however, an apparently mixed group of lepers came together looking for healing. We don't know the exact make-up of this group, but the fact that Jesus instructs them to show themselves to the priests (a practice the the Hellenists certainly wouldn't have followed), that he calls out the one who returned as "this foreigner," and that Luke, the Gospel author, identifies him as a Samaritan, indicates that at least a good number of the remaining nine were Jews. Unlike Naaman, whose irreplaceable skills as an army commander allowed him to continue his life despite contracting leprosy, these 10 lepers were ordinary people, whose disease cast them out of the societies of their birth, forcing them to seek the company of other cast-offs, even if their cultural heritage would have ordinarily have put them at odds with one another.

And then comes Jesus. A Jewish healer, decidedly in one of those factions.

The lepers probably heard of how he had cured at least one man of leprosy, the very disease they were suffering from. Indeed, it might even have been a story of that cure that brought them together to seek out Jesus. But whether they had been chasing him for a while, or just happened to hear about him as he passed close by to where they lived, they knew what he could do for them and positioned themselves where they could encounter him without violating any of the usual laws about isolation. Camped out a ways away from the village entrance so as to not bring the wrath of its inhabitants down on them, they probably took turns watching for Jesus and were quick to alert each other when he was finally spotted so that they could call out together and thus better make themselves heard. And he does hear them. In a culture where the priests were the gatekeepers as to whether or not lepers could reenter society, Jesus's instruction to show themselves to the priests is unambiguously a granting of their request. Nine of them immediately rush off, their solidarity with each other broken by the chance to rejoin the families and villages that had once cast them out. Only the foreigner, the Samaritan, sticks around to praise and thank the source of his healing. Instead of reclaiming the hostility of his birthright, he is joyously thankful and like Naaman before him, radically realigns his allegiances towards the one who favored him with a cure, the one who had formerly been his enemy.

God seldom acts in our lives in such an obvious way as he did for Naaman and the Samaritan leper. However, we too are called to radically realign our allegiances to put Him first. Elsewhere in the Gospel, Jesus says "If any one comes to me without hating his father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, and even his own life, he cannot be my disciple." Naaman, in aligning himself with Israel's God, turned his back on the traditions of his family and nation. The Samaritan ex-leper, in bowing before Jesus, turned his back on the hostility between Samaritans and Jews. We even see this demand being lived out in the second reading where Paul, a man who had been a persecutor of the Church, has become so radically aligned with Jesus that he is willing to undergo imprisonment for him. And it should be remembered that in Roman times, prisons were dark, hot, crowded, dirty, fetid, and generally miserable places to be chained up. Prisoners weren't even fed unless they had friends or relatives on the outside who could either bring in food themselves or pay for that to happen. This is the kind of commitment that we are called to make: one that calls us out of ourselves, out of our comfortable, familiar circumstances, and into a new, all-encompassing relationship with God.