

PREGO PLUS: BACKGROUND NOTES

TWENTY-EIGHTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME, YEAR C

First Reading 2 Kings 5: 14–17

The main character in today's story is Naaman, a great general from the kingdom of Aram – a region in present-day Syria which now includes Damascus and Aleppo. He is very powerful and successful but afflicted by a skin disease: 'leprosy' in our translation. This was probably not leprosy as we understand it nowadays, but some other dermatological problem (there appears to be no archaeological evidence that leprosy actually existed in ancient times).

Throughout the story, which starts at the beginning of Chapter 5, there is a contrast between Naaman's great power and the humble people at his service who support him with helpful suggestions and advice.

It is a young Israelite slave girl belonging to the wife of Naaman's household who first suggests that a Prophet in Samaria could cure him. When Naaman goes to see Elisha, he is laden with presents and gold to pay for his cure, but on arrival, Elisha does not come to meet him and simply sends a message that he should bathe in the Jordan seven times. Feeling snubbed, Naaman is about to leave in a huff, when his servants remonstrate with him and encourage him to immerse himself in the river (2 Kings 5: 1–14). On being cured, Naaman wants to pay his dues but Elisha refuses.

As well as being physically cleansed, Naaman is also changed internally. His original arrogance – '*Are not Abana and Pharpar, the rivers of Damascus, better than all the waters of Israel? Could I not wash in them, and be clean?*' (2 Kings 5: 12) becomes gratitude, and he promises to worship the God of Israel. He now considers himself Elisha's servant.

God's favours cannot be bought. Sensible, common-sense advice comes here not from the powerful but from the humble. Healing is a gift of God which cannot be controlled by human actions.

Gospel Luke 17: 11–19

It is traditionally thought that Luke was a physician. Whether this is the case or not, he is certainly very concerned about the healing of men and women, as in this story about the ten lepers. The diagnosis of leprosy was in many ways a sentence to exile. Clothing affected by leprosy was burned; houses afflicted with leprosy were torn down; people beset by leprosy were avoided, 'like the plague'. For Luke, too, healing is the restoration of physical and spiritual well-being.

At the time of Jesus, hatred had long existed between Jew and Samaritan, even though they shared the Torah and venerated Moses. Like most deep-seated hatreds, the origin of the differences was not really known by the people. But throughout Luke's Gospel, it is the outcasts, like the Samaritan, who recognize Jesus for who he truly is. It is the outcast who sees and who responds freely to the grace he has experienced.

Jesus! Master! Take pity on us.

All of the lepers were immediately healed by Jesus, but only one came back to thank him. Not only did he suffer from leprosy, but being a Samaritan he was already regarded by the Jews as a 'second-class citizen', lower in status than the Gentiles, and a heretic.

Leprosy in Jesus's time included skin diseases like psoriasis and acne – it was perhaps one of these conditions that affected Naaman (see First Reading) as he was able to move about freely. The ten in the Gospel story, however, suffered from 'real' leprosy and were marginalized.

Jesus tells them to show themselves to the priests who at that time would have the authority to certify them as clean, as they represented both religion and medicine.

Stand up ... your faith has saved you

The Samaritan's act of throwing himself at the feet of Jesus to praise and thank him signifies not only his physical healing, but also his conversion.



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