

Eaglehawk Uniting Church
Sermon 7th July 2013
Rev Ralph Clarke
Readings: 2 Kgs 5:1-19a; Luke 10:1-11,16-20

These scriptures encourage us to share the story of God with people. There's lots of detail in the gospel story but today I will focus on the OT story of Naaman.

The first thing to say is – the story of God is for ALL people, not only the traditional people of God. Naaman was a Syrian military commander, a foreigner to Israel, who also had a bad skin disease. People would prefer to stay away from him.

Luke tells us that Jesus sent 70 people rather than the original 12 disciples to share the story of Jesus. The #70 or 72 is symbolic of the number of nations. One of the things I like about this church's Chibobo project is that it keeps you thinking beyond your own community. It may not always be easy to accept that Iraqi's, Afghani's, Africans, Chinese, prisoners, louts, boat people and the disabled are also loved by God, but part of our task as a church is to proclaim that in all that we do. Luke shows a church that goes out. It makes a point of meeting people who do not belong to the church community. It is concerned with awakening faith in others rather than nurturing the faith of its own people. Its primary concern is its identity and mission as the People of God rather than what its buildings look like. Is our primary concern to nurture our own community or outreach to others?

These readings call us to be open to God working through us in lots of different ways – maybe even unusual and unexpected ways. Naaman's NEED is the starting point for telling that story of God as it often is for us now. That was also true for me when I came to faith. I suffered a physical breakdown in 1964 and a neighbour asked a guy from MBI who was in Tooleybuc at the time to talk to me. It was the start of a long journey of faith for me.

Naaman's NEED had precedence over his race, and his status. A key player in Naaman learning about God was a little Israeli girl who had been captured by Naaman's armies on one of their raids in Israel. This girl was made a servant to Naaman's wife. In spite of being taken from her homeland this girl had not lost her faith in God. She told her mistress about Elisha the prophet who can heal people, who told Naaman, who told his King, who sent Naaman to Elisha.

It was a delicate matter for a military leader who had been terrorising Israel, to then go looking for healing in Israel. You know you won't be trusted, and you might wonder if you will be able to trust anyone when you get there. Even though Naaman's boss sent a diplomatic letter, the king of Israel thought this was a trap, a way to pick a fight. It didn't help when Naaman rocked up with all his soldiers and their wagons at

Elisha's house. Elisha didn't invite his visitor in, or even go out to meet him. Maybe he was too scared. He just sent a message for Naaman to go and bathe in the Jordan river seven times and he would be cured.

A simple approach is often good for sharing faith but sometimes people have trouble accepting that God is just there for us. Naaman was a bit taken aback by Elisha telling him to bathe in the Jordan 7 times. As a military commander he was used to everyone saying jump when he said jump, yet when he comes for healing he expected more. He thought Elisha would at least pretend to be a healer by waving his arms about or putting some potion on him. But none of that. Naaman was quite put out. He threw a hissy fit and threatened to go home, saying the rivers in Damascus were cleaner than the dirty old Jordan river, and he might as well have washed there and saved himself the trouble of coming to Israel. Some of the people we tell our story to may not appreciate our country, or church, or ways of doing things. They might not even like us.

Naaman would have gone home except his servants talked some sense into him. They asked him, "if the prophet had asked you to do something difficult would you have done it?" Yes. Well why not do this simple thing. And Naaman couldn't think of an answer. So he went down and bathed 7 times and was made clean. And then Naaman believed in the God of Israel. Like Naaman, we also need a simple trust in God.

This story reminds me that it is not only the hearers who need to trust God. It's the ones telling or living the story as well. I am struck by all the steps or hurdles in this story. A chain of people helped Naaman to hear about God. If any one of them failed to do his or her part in the story, Naaman would not have come to faith, and the king of Israel would not have seen that some human needs are bigger than international rows. Israeli people would not have known that God accepts foreigners. This story reminds us that lots of different contributions are needed, from the simple sharing of a little girl, to international relationships.

In the end it is God who is important. It can be really hard to see how God works, & hard to put our faith in something unknown. Society says punish wrongdoers, but God says they are forgiven. Society hasn't got much patience with people who break the law, but God will wait a lifetime for them to change their ways. Society gives greater honour to sports people and those in the arts, or to the wealthy, but Jesus used children and reformed sinners as his role models. Society often says boat people or murderers are no good, as if these people can never wash away their offences. Yet here, a foreign military leader with leprosy is accepted. Lots of people wonder how putting trust in God can help, and yet trust has been an inspiration & strength to many people. Let that trust be a strength to you as well.