



HOMILY by Father Robbie Low

## **28<sup>th</sup> Sunday Year C**

### ***Restored like a little child***

*Readings: 2 Kings 5: 14-17; Ps 97, 2 Timothy 2: 8-13, Luke 17: 11-19*

If you had been living in the Northern Kingdom of Israel during the ninth century before Christ, your life would have been blighted by a long running series of border raids and all out wars with the bloodthirsty and rapacious kingdom of Syria. The regular success of the Syrians was due in no small part to the army commander, Naaman. His story is spiritually educative in a number of ways.

Despite his triumph and his fame Naaman's life is blighted by illness, a leprous skin disease that makes him not only deeply unattractive but something of a social outcast. There is no cure. However, in his household is a little Israeli slave girl, one of the spoils of war, who is attendant upon Naaman's wife. We are not told anything else about her but we will know that the raid that ended her freedom probably also ended the lives of her male family protectors. She has then nothing to thank Naaman for and plenty to curse him with.

Holy Scripture paints an entirely different picture. Contrary to what you and I might feel in these circumstances, the maid seeks only the good of her oppressor and enslaver. She commends the warlord, while doing his wife's hair at the dressing table, to the prophet Elisha who, she confidently predicts, will cure him.

In compassionately seeking her persecutor's good and salvation and pointing him to the one true God, the little serving girl is a model of the Church, a forerunner of that other servant girl, Mary and a living witness to the power of forgiveness that will be spoken from the Cross of Christ.

The King of Syria sends Naaman, along with a king's ransom, to buy this cure. The King of Israel is terrified and thinks this is a trick to cause another war. The King of Syria does not understand that the State cannot offer salvation. That is a secular, materialist view beloved of most tyrannies. He also does not understand that there is some things that money cannot buy.

Elisha comes to Israel's rescue. 'Send Naaman to me. He needs to know that someone here speaks God's word'. So Naaman, in all his glory, complete with chariots, horsemen and treasure 'rocks up' outside the humble 'semi' of the prophet. Elisha does not even dignify him by making an appearance but sends out his servant with instruction for Naaman to wash seven times in the Jordan.

(Seven is the mystical number of completion. The Jordan will be where the sacrament of salvation will be instituted centuries hence.)

Naaman is furious. The prophet won't see him. Won't pray for him. Won't wave his hand over him. Outrageous. A wise courtier calms him down. 'If the prophet had commanded a mighty act you would have done that', he correctly predicts.

Naaman listens and then does what the prophet commanded. Naked as the day he was born he immerses himself seven times in the Jordan. In so doing he has had to learn, in an instant, to be both humble and obedient – two of the great

lessons of the Faith. His power and might and wealth do not impress the Almighty, only his submission to God's Word and his humble obedience matter. It is no different for any of us disfigured by the ravages of sin.

Naaman is healed. 'Restored like a little child', Scripture says. Baptism is prefigured. Returning now to the prophet, Naaman tries to thank him with gifts. The prophet insists on taking none lest the great man forget that you cannot buy mercy. Salvation is a GIFT of God. Thank God – not man.

And then Naaman does something extraordinary. He asks to take two barrows of earth, of the soil of Israel, back with him to Damascus. He knows that he will still have to go to pagan services alongside his master the king and asks forgiveness for this necessity. BUT.... He pledges that he will now worship only the One True God and this soil will be the holy ground on which he offers prayer and sacrifice and thanksgiving from now on. 'Behold I know now that there is no god in all the earth but the God of Israel'. Naaman is a convert and everywhere he appears his very being, now healed, will be a living testimony to the salvation of God.

We have come a long way. The compassionate heart of the persecuted church reaches out in love to the lost, disfigured by sin. The seeker for healing must come to the Word of God faithfully proclaimed by prophetic witness. The seeker cannot buy salvation but must pass through the tests of humility and obedience and the sacraments of salvation, the waters of life. The thankfulness for salvation will never end and he will carry that witness and the holy ground of his redeeming wherever he goes. His very self will be a living testimony to the wonderful mercy of God. Our story should be no different.