



28th Sunday in Ordinary Time Year C: NAAMAN THE SYRIAN

A homily by Fr Robbie Low

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

We have just witnessed the murder and attempted murder of Jews by an immigrant of Syrian origin. It is, I dare to suggest, the tragic but perfect background against which to understand the magnitude and significance of this particular Bible story and also to put in context the recrudescence of the vile 'Jew hatred' to which the current war seems, in the mind of government, media and police, to have given peculiar licence.

The history of Israel – Syria relations on the northern border, at the time of this story, is one of intermittent warfare, brutal cross border raiding parties and the eventual extinguishing of the state of Israel and the wholesale removal of her people from their land. Sound familiar?

And here comes the story of Naaman, the Syrian. He is not a lone, marauding jihadi but the leader of a war machine bent on the subjugation and eventual elimination of his southern neighbour. He is also a sick man. Amongst the swag that he has looted from Israel is a young girl whom he has spared to be his slave. It is more than likely that

her family were not similarly spared. One can think of few situations which would be better breeding grounds for hatred and revenge.

Extraordinarily this unnamed girl has pity on this man who is the cause of her suffering. Thus she tells him about Elisha, the prophet who can heal him.

Naaman will not understand this until later but it is a story that begins in an extraordinary act of forgiveness and compassion and love and from which everything else flows.

For the moment it remains in the political dimension. A letter is sent to the quaking king of Israel demanding that he sort out the cure for Naaman. It will be sometime before Naaman grasps the difference between the spiritual authority of God and its little human , political impersonation.

The king of Israel is in despair. The letter is clearly a 'set up', a casus belli, an excuse for more war. He weeps and rends his garments. Disaster looms. Elisha, whose court sources are clearly impeccable, sends a message to the king. 'Send him to me.' So Naaman, with his troops and treasure head for the dwelling of the prophet.

To Naaman's astonishment and disgust, the prophet doesn't even have the courtesy to come out and greet the great man. Has he any idea whom he is daring to humiliate here? Indeed he has - and that is precisely the point. Naaman has to humble himself. It is a pre-requisite. He has to learn the inferiority of the physical human power to the overwhelming majesty of divine authority.

Elisha tells him, via his servant !!! (how much more humiliation can the Generalissimo stand?) to go and wash 7 times in the nearby Jordan. Naaman's response is blistering. 'Have I come all this way from the

mighty rivers of my homeland to be told to scrub up in this pisspot of a river? etc. Those who have done their time in the military can write the rest of the script. All this way, hopes so high, so much booty to buy his health, so public a humiliation in front of his own troops and personal militia. It is, I suspect, in a moment of temporary respite from his fury, that his closest counsellors advise caution.

‘If you had been asked to perform some heroic deed would you not have done it? Why not, my lord, just do what you are asked?’ After all, unsaid or sotto voce, this is what the rest of us have to do?

Naaman listens and accepts their advice. He is , in the process, learning humility before God and obedience to His Word. The next stage of his spiritual journey has begun. He goes and bathes seven times in the Jordan – and IS CURED !

He returns, not only overflowing with thanksgiving to the Prophet and offers him the king’s ransom he has brought with him. Elisha declines all offers for Namaan must also learn that the gifts of God cannot be bought. They are free. Naaman cannot ever repay his debt to God for his salvation any more than we can.

And then he asks for, to us, a strange thing and a dispensation. He wants to take with him a couple of barrows (two mules worth) of the soil of Israel so that, when home again, he can kneel on holy ground and invoke the One whom he has come to recognise as the one and only true God. For this is also a story of Conversion.

And the dispensation....?

He knows that when he returns to the Syrian capital he will have to go with his king into the Temple of Rimmon and help him kneel and pray. So he asks for Elisha’s forgiveness in advance and his dispensation.

The barrows of earth will keep him connected to the Holy Land and to its God , the only one and true God, creator of Heaven and Earth.

What begins, therefore, as a story of war, brutality, hostage taking, murder, cross border raids, historic enmities and apparently irreconcilable disputes, ends in a story of the assertion of divine spiritual authority over the strife of Man, the humbling of pride, the lessons of obedience, the heart of thanksgiving and the conversion of a soul.

And it all begins with that act of forgiveness, love and compassion of the unconsidered, anonymous hostage girl, with so many reasons to hate, transforming the affairs of nations by her immense generosity, love and passionate desire for reconciliation and the good of all.

Powerful stuff.