

**2024 TALK FOR CAREY, 3.11.24, 1 CORINTHIANS 13 / 2 KINGS 5:1-10**

**LIVING 'FAITH-HOPE-LOVE-FULLY'**

Let's be quiet for a moment. Let's give time to reflect upon those two passages of scripture we have just heard read. Let's give God opportunity to speak to us through the pages of the Bible...

(Before I reflect upon Paul's purple passage on love and the story of Naaman, does anyone have anything they would like to share...? Something perhaps the LORD has laid on you heart...?)... from these scriptures/from your week... ?

Today, on this Remembrance Sunday, we are thinking about our first mission statement: to 'live out our faith'. More specifically, to 'Live out our faith, providing Christ-centred, Bible-based ministry to nurture our spiritual growth'. And next Sunday we will close this mini-series with thinking about what it means to 'open our arms to our community'. Simple huh?... In one sense this dual challenge IS simple, but is far from being easy. What does it mean for **us** to be the **body of Christ** in **these** days? (This is in a week when many fellow Christians in the U.S. have just voted for an unrepentant criminal, in preference to a black woman to be the next US President...!). What does it look like for us to be both a people faithful to our holy God AND a people who, in the name of Jesus, embrace our world, as it is... We need to sit with that double-edged challenge for a moment... (QUIET)... We are called to bear our painful, cross-carrying calling each day & for a lifetime... Aren't we... ? ...

And as if this challenge wasn't difficult enough, your crazy pastor has just invented a new word! How ridiculous!. What on earth do I mean?. What on earth does it look like to live 'faith-hope-love-fully'?... But I can justify inventing this new word in two ways.

Firstly, our God always escapes the boundaries of language. What about God saying to Moses: "I am the I AM"... And Jesus saying to some very cross-looking teachers of the Law: "Before Abraham was, I AM"... God often sounds ridiculous - to us, to our ears, to our situations.

Secondly, the apostle Paul stretches the limits of language in trying to describe 'love'. He is violent with his own language, in order to forcefully remind us of the power of God's love & ours... What a passage this is... It's one that I read at

my sister's wedding. A passage I have read & pondered over many times. And yet I can't begin to do justice to these glorious words in one, short sermon.

I'm not going to attempt to unpack this passage. What I will do instead is to encourage you all to read it yourselves this week. And to spend time reflecting on what God might be saying to you from these words. That will be (God willing) a much more effective way of God speaking to you, than me preaching one message. One feeble attempt to do justice to this purple passage.

What I will do instead is to explore what it means for us to be people of faith, hope & love, by re-telling the story of Naaman the Syrian... Naaman is a big man, a big name. He has a huge reputation, even in Israel, of being a 'valiant soldier'. Quite a description - for someone who was a leading enemy of Israel.

These days, Naaman would be in the cross-hairs of the Israeli army, navy & air force. He probably wouldn't get anywhere near Israel before he was taken out. Possibly killed by a missile made in the UK... Too political ? Sorry ! I'm not sorry really. If we want to be a faithful people, we have to be realistic about the world we are living in. As the great preacher, Charles Spurgeon put it, we live a life of faith, with the Bible in one hand & a proper newspaper in the other. (When I say 'a proper newspaper', I mean preferably not the Daily Mail...! The Daily Mail is a 'viewspaper', not a newspaper. There, I've said it!...).

But let's get back to our story. What else do we know about this man Naaman ? Naaman... also... has... leprosy. Spoiler alert! – Naaman gets healed of his leprosy. Wow! Praise the LORD! And this is thanks to a few words from a young girl from Israel, who finds her place & her voice - in Naaman's household. She is living, as a kidnapped slave, in the closest proximity to a leading enemy of Israel. And she thinks NOT : 'Wouldn't it be great if this man were dead?... NO! She thinks **instead**: 'Wouldn't it be great if this man was healed by God?'... Alleluia! Thanks be to God for the mercy in this young girl's heart. Praise God for his mercy, his loving-kindness - even towards the biggest enemies of Israel.

But before I get too carried away, I would like us to look at what it means to live 'faith-hope-love-fully'. And I will attempt to do this, through the experiences of three main characters in our story.

Firstly, we have the King of Israel. I think this is King Joram. Interestingly this King is not named in this passage, but is named at the start of 2 Kings chapter 3. King Joram is an example to us - of how NOT to live by faith. He gets the

letter from the King of Aram, about Naaman's visit. And the letter kindly requests that the King of Israel heals Naaman of his leprosy. And Joram instantly goes into full panic mode. He imagines (wrongly) that the King of Aram just wants to pick a fight with him. Joram immediately sees this as the biggest threat to his rule & his Kingdom. So, the whole screen of King Joram's personal laptop is suddenly flashing red. And to make matters worse, there's a very loud alarm going off too - somewhere. Which he can't silence! Oh dear!

Contrast this with what happens to the King of Judah, around about the same time. In 2 Chronicles 20, King Jehosaphat hears terrible news. He finds out that not just one army but **two** armies are on the march towards Jerusalem. He is rightly alarmed. But instead of going into panic mode, he 'resolves to seek the LORD'. And he calls the people of Judah to fast & pray with him. And guess what? Jerusalem is miraculously delivered from the approaching threat...

As Carey prepares to draw up & agree a Mission Action Plan for the next 5 years, we need to learn from Jehosaphat, not Joram. As we wonder how we will deal with the big budget deficit forecast for our church next year, we need to be seeking our faithful God. We need to be laying our fears & anxieties before the LORD in prayer. We need to be fasting & praying together. (Do I hear an amen?) When we meet as a church, at our church meeting on Wednesday night, perhaps the one thing we might agree to do is this: to call one another to a time of prayer & fasting. Perhaps, ahead of the feasting of Christmas, we might declare Advent to be a time of prayer & fasting for our church? But this is something for us to bring to the church meeting on Wed night...

Our 2<sup>nd</sup> character to consider is, of course, Naaman himself. Naaman the Syrian has come into enemy territory expressly to seek healing. And when he gets an impersonal message from the prophet of Israel, Elisha, to go & wash seven times in the River Jordan, he is affronted. Incensed might be a good word to use here too. Even apoplectic with rage. Elisha hasn't even bothered to speak to him personally. Elisha has told him to go back the way he has just come. And Naaman, quite reasonably, chunters away to himself about the rivers of Syria being even better than the River Jordan to wash in... But when he returns home, his servants (including the young girl from Israel) reason with him that Elisha has not asked him to do anything difficult. So why not try, at least?

Naaman, finds his hope for healing restored. Naaman hopes once again in the God of Israel. He shows faith & humility. And he goes back, & washes in the Jordan River, probably not far from where Jesus was later to be baptised at the start of his ministry... And behold! Praise God. After the 7<sup>th</sup> time he comes out of that water with the skin of a baby. Alleluia !

The third character for us to consider is the prophet Elisha. The prophet here is an example to us of how to live 'faith-hope-love-fully'. But specifically to love fully. Elisha could have treated this man as 'the enemy'. And refused to even send him a message from God. Elisha doesn't exactly roll out the red carpet for Naaman. But he does pass on the message that God has given for Naaman. And this makes all the difference... God calls us to love our neighbours. And Jesus even calls us to love our enemies. Thanks be to God – for the loving-kindness of God, which knows no limits.

King Jehosophat, Naaman the Syrian & the Prophet Elisha together teach us how to live 'faith-hope-love-fully' as God's people. As the body of Christ today. But the middle part of this human sandwich, Naaman, reminds of us something more too.

The story of God's salvation throughout history, can be seen as a flowing river. Sometimes a tiny trickle of water. Sometimes a mighty torrent. And right in the middle of this flow are Adam & Eve, Abraham & Sarah, Isaac & Rebekah... and so on. But how wonderful that other people get caught up & swept along in God's great river of salvation. So, we can name people like: Ruth, Rahab the prostitute, the widow of Zarephath, Naaman the Syrian. And when we come to the ministry of Jesus this river gets bigger. There's the Samaritan woman at the well, there's the Syro-Phoenician woman, there's all manner of Roman centurions...!. Then we come to the story of the church – the river gets even bigger: there's the Ethiopian eunuch, there's Cornelius & all his household, Lydia the first convert to Christ in Europe. More & more unlikely people get swept up & carried along by God's mighty river of faith, hope & love. More & more people, not from God's original chosen people, get grafted into this ancient vine, this wonderful tree of life. And **we too** have been swept away by the good news of Jesus...! How can this be? Sinners like ourselves... Alleluia!

And to finish, I will begin to anticipate next Sunday's message. How many people out there are also desperate to hear good news ? How can we be a

Christ-centred & Bible-based people of God, except by sharing our lived-out faith, within our community...? This is a town, like Nineveh, where people don't know their left hand from their right. A place where too many people are 'like sheep without a shepherd'... ***Are there people out there who we still think do not really belong in here...?*** The story of Naaman tells us otherwise. Paul's words about love tells us otherwise. In the words of that hymn, each of us need to 'compass anew what the Almighty can do'. (READ Ephesians 3)