

May the words of my mouth, and the meditations of all our hearts, be now and always acceptable unto You, O Lord our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

I'm sorry but I can't do Valentine's Day today. I have friends who lost a son to a debilitating disease a few weeks ago, and on Friday they lost a daughter to the same disease. I don't understand why this has happened, but I do have a sense of their suffering. Our daily readings this week from the book of Ecclesiastes are helpful in discovering what our response to crises like these should be ... we are to take what we get in this world and make the most of it ... we are to endure.

For example, look at the way the beggar in our gospel approaches Jesus seeking healing: *"If You choose You could make me clean!"* It's almost accusatory ... as if to say; "the fact that You haven't so far is on You ... my discomfort is Your fault, Your problem." And *Jesus does* so choose; He makes the leper well ... *immediately!* Then Jesus tells the man to not tell anyone ... instead He is to *"go to the priests, to do what the Law requires, so that it may be a testimony to them"*! What? Name another time when we see Jesus reinforcing the very priests that He so often has so many issues with?

Yes of course, Jesus knows the man will ignore Him on this matter. But perhaps the purpose of this exchange is to highlight the deep impact that suffering has on our psyche? When we suffer to the extent that those who endure leprosy did (and in some cases still do) relieving that suffering becomes our only desire. It's all we think about. Suffering reduces our ability to think properly, especially if it entails physical pain. Even those of us on the side lines see only too clearly the effect that suffering has, and can imagine just as clearly, the impact that suffering could have on us, but for the grace of God.

Healing today is often (but not always) attributable to the skill and hard work of many scientists and medical staff over a long period ... and all of that skill and hard work is God given ... even if some of them don't credit Him for it. But miraculous healings like the one of the leper, and the one from our OT story today are unsettling; they represent the ultimate mystery. We can't attribute the source of the healing without acknowledging the power of God ... *and in the process* we come face to face with our deepest guilt and sin.

In my last few months at Halswell, a friend of mine witnessed a similar miraculous healing event during a healing mission to Nepal. He and his team were presented with a teenage boy who was incapable of standing unsupported let alone walking. The bones were severely disfigured, and the muscle tissue had atrophied away completely. My friend, and the others he was with, prayed over the boy ... and *as they watched* the leg straightened, and muscle grew! The boy was able to stand and walk ... immediately!

The OT story of Naaman's healing is even clearer in some respects. If God has decided to heal somebody, it comes about even despite their best efforts to get in the way. Naaman ... *the great man, the mighty warrior* is healed because one of his wife's servant laments the fact that her master *isn't with* the prophet Elisha in Israel. Think about that, an Israelite slave girl was heard and listened to ... by a wealthy and powerful Syrian woman. If you were looking for an example of how the power of the Holy Spirit brings about the will of God ... here it is!

Furthermore, the king of Aram (Syria) seeking to restore his key military general, wrote to the king of Israel seeking his permission for Naaman to make the journey to see the prophet. Perhaps not surprisingly, the king of Israel strongly objects to the presence of an aggressive neighbour's military chief *with all his entourage* coming to town. But Elisha the prophet hears about it and encourages the king to let Naaman come.

Then, having made all the preparations and completed the long journey to see Elisha, Naaman decides that he won't do what the prophet tells him to do because Elisha seemingly showed no respect for Naaman's authority. Enter the servants again, you know, the people that every sensible general listens to first thing every morning ... *"surely if he had asked you to do something difficult you would have done it"* ... in other words ... just do it!

Lastly as far as this sermon goes, when the Syrian is healed, and he finally recognises where his healing has come from, he says in front of all his staff *"now I know that there is no God in all the earth except in Israel!"* I wonder what that did for his prospects for promotion when he got home?

Finally, in Paul's letter to the Corinthians, he puts this healing into a different context. He encourages them to pursue an *imperishable prize*, not one that mere athletes strive for in the races they run ... the prize that will endure beyond all stress and strain, beyond time itself. We all need endurance and discipline, and comfort and sustenance in times of crisis ... eternity is a long time.

My friends who have lost two of their three children within a month will need every bit of endurance and discipline, comfort and sustenance they can get in the days ahead.

Their healing will be miraculous, and it may be painful. I pray that they remember Jesus loves them in these darkest of days ... and that He always has.

Amen.