

Sixth Sunday after Epiphany. 11 February 2018.  
In strange places. (2 Kings 5:1-14)

I have been in some strange places and some strange situations in my life. Hitchhiking in Mexico. Getting lost in the back streets of Naples as night fell. Being questioned by a police officer who wanted to know why I had a bag full of money when I was about to get on a plane in South Sudan. Lots of interesting places and situations.

Your strange places and situations may not be quite as weird as mine. They will be different. When we find ourselves in strange, unusual, perhaps uncomfortable situations there are lots of different possible reactions. One reaction is to try to bluff our way through with bravado, to think we have a situation under our control and to try to make things happen on our terms. I am not sure if that ever works, (though it did with getting the bag of money onto the plane – but that is another story!) but I suspect that most times bluffing or forcing our way through is not a very helpful way of responding to life's more unusual moments.

Another reaction is driven by fear. We get locked down by being out of control, being in places where we can't see what is going on, where we feel that things are being asked of us which are beyond what we imagine to be our capacity. And fear blinds us almost as much as arrogance.

Our first reading this morning was the fascinating story of Naaman the Aramean General (2 Kings 5:1-14). All the characters in the story find themselves in a strange place, a strange situation. They all react differently, some creatively and some not.

First there was Naaman himself. He was immensely powerful. He commanded an army. He had control over the lives of so many people. At his orders people lived or died. But he had no control over his own life. He had leprosy. It was a disease which in anyone with a lower social standing would have meant he was ostracised from society. We see that in the lepers who approached Jesus, like the one in today's Gospel reading (Mark 1:40-45). People with leprosy were pushed to the fringes of society. What sort of power must Naaman have had to be able to keep his exalted position!! But as for the disease which was eating away at him, he could do nothing. A strange place in which to be!

The next character in the story is the slave girl. Her life had been uprooted by a military raid, something sadly still happening in parts of our world. Warring armies not only fight soldier to soldier but civilians, women and children, get caught up in the turmoil and violence. It happens still. This young girl had been torn from her home and had ended up as a slave in the household of Naaman, serving his wife. A strange place. Considering where she might have ended up it was perhaps the best place she could have been.

She had been enslaved, but it seems she still had compassion. Would you? Would you have cared about someone who was responsible for you being in that situation? She had compassion for Naaman and even more she had something to offer, the suggestion of a way of his problems being addressed. Notice later in the story there is no mention of her. She didn't win her freedom by giving that information. There was no happy ending for her as a reward. She had compassion, despite her circumstances and what had been done to her. So, she spoke up. A strange place in which to be!

The next cameo appearance is by the King of Aram. There is the possibility that his useful army commander might be healed! Great! But to pursue that he has to deal with his enemy. I wonder if he considered a military option. Instead what he offers is an enormous bribe. The value of the silver and gold was huge! The ten garments didn't mean that he had his tailor whip up 10 new suits for the King of Israel. They were ceremonial garments, in themselves incredibly valuable. Offering them along with the money showed that the King of Aram was pleading to the King of Israel to respond, making himself vulnerable to the other king. A strange place in which to be!

Lack of control, compassion, vulnerability. These can be uneasy spaces, situations, in which to find ourselves.

The next character is someone who loses the plot when his fear grabs him. The King of Israel is suddenly confronted by his neighbour and enemy's powerful military commander and what seems to him to be an outrageous suggestion that the man be healed. Even with the extravagant gift in his hands the King of Israel is terrified. He sees a trap. He thinks this is an excuse for triggering another bout of conflict between the two nations. War was always costly, in lives and financially. All he can see in this is death and disaster. He is petrified by his fear.

That happens. We can be so narrow in our perspective on what is in front of us that we get stuck, lose imagination, lose hope, lose perspective, think the worst. Tearing clothes was a sign of grief. The King thought he was already as good as dead and he was grieving for himself in advance. A strange place in which to be!

Enter Elisha. In the books of Kings we read about two key characters who were the people through whom God spoke to try to bring the nation back on track. Elijah first and then his disciple Elisha. Elisha promises to sort it all out and I am sure the sigh of relief from the King of Israel was almost deafening. So Naaman toddles off to Samaria, north of Jerusalem. This was a man used to making an impression. He was used to people bowing and scraping and showing him honour, fearing him even.

So Naaman rocks up at Elisha's place and Elisha doesn't even come out to see him! He just sends a message saying, 'go wash in the Jordan'. What did Naaman do? He threw a tantrum. There seem to have been a few tantrums from characters in the stories we have been reading from the Bible recently! Naaman stamps his feet. "I am important. I am used to control. People don't dictate things to me. I do to them!" It seems that Naaman was expecting that if he had to do something it would be something that reflected his strength, his manliness, his courage. He was a tough bloke and expected to have to do tough blokey stuff. Instead it was 'take seven baths'. He felt disrespected. He felt belittled. He was astonished because people just didn't treat him like this!! A strange place in which to be!

But Naaman had a servant who was both wise and confident enough to risk trying to give Naaman some simple truths to digest. Naaman managed to set aside his arrogance, to find some humility, and somehow he was healed.

The point of the story is not Naaman's healing. It is how these characters, and we, deal with life. It is about how we deal with life when we find ourselves in strange places, strange situations. May we sometimes be so caught up in our perspective, even an arrogant perspective, that we fail to see something there in front of us. Are our eyes open wide enough? Do we have enough humility? And may we sometimes get so caught up with being terrified by the strange things that happen in our lives that we react badly?

Could we also sometimes be so caught up with what has been done to us, the things that might have gone pear shaped in our lives that we miss an opportunity to show compassion and to assist someone, even if it brings no benefit to ourselves?

Compassion, mercy, humility, courage, open eyes and open hearts. Hope. We read this story, as we should, through the eyes of the New Testament, through the message of Jesus.

Strange places, strange situations, confronting times are places of opportunity. Compassion, mercy, humility, courage, open eyes and open hearts. Hope. These things help us turn the strange into something new.

Amen.

Paul Mitchell