

Sunday 3rd July 2022 - Pentecost 4
2 Kings 5:1-14 & Luke 10:1-11 & 16-20
Fake News or Real News!
Rev David Coster

I first started work on this address some weeks ago when I was spending time in the Office while Gail was at home, ill with Covid. On the Radio New Zealand National News at about that time there was an interview with members of Groundswell meeting in Gore, objecting to the Government's three waters proposal. Now I have to admit that I know little about what the three waters proposal entails, but those who were objecting didn't seem to know much more than me. When the Reporter asked them whether they had read documentation relating to the three waters proposal every one of them said, No. They also felt it wasn't reasonable that a Reporter should ask such a question of them.

Ever since the Presidency of Donald Trump we seem to have a questioning of whether something is true or not and whether it is fake news or not. Propaganda is nothing new. President Putin is not the first and won't be the last to use propaganda for his own political purposes. Political and Military leaders have used it for centuries to justify their motives and ends. But with an increase in Social media, Podcasts, and News media competing for a listening audience the issue of which Reporter or station is more trustworthy seems to be on the increase.

The question is "Whose voice do you listen to?" Often it is the one we agree with because that reinforces our point of view.

Our response often depends on the circumstances in which we find ourselves. In our reading from 2 Kings for today we find a very ancient example of status, money, power, politics and the looming threat of war provided by a Military leader, a King, a Prophet of God and captive slaves.

Naaman was the very successful commander of the army of the King of Aram (Syria). He was a man, I presume, who was used to getting what he wanted. He was a Commander used to giving orders and having them obeyed. An uneasy peace had existed for a number of years between the Kingdom of Israel and the Kingdom of Aram. Unfortunately, Naaman had leprosy, or some other debilitating skin disease, which carried with it the stigma of social shame and isolation. Successful as a military commander yet still a man trapped by the isolation and concern of ill health, Naaman sought a cure. Used to giving orders he found that he could not order someone to fix his health, or simply purchase a cure.

Naaman's wife had a servant girl who had been captured from Israel. This young lady mentioned to her mistress, "If only Naaman were with the prophet in Samaria. He would cure him of his leprosy."

Naaman has tried every treatment going for a cure of his disease. None has worked so he takes seriously the advice of the unlikely young lady prophet from Israel.

Being a Military Commander, and therefore a servant of the King, he knows he must observe correct Diplomatic protocol. Naaman visited the King of Aram and asked for his blessing on his visit to the Prophet in Samaria. The King sends Naaman off with Letters of Reference and rich gifts for the King of Israel. So desperate is Naaman for healing that he is prepared to make the long and dangerous journey facing the risks entailed.

Spies for the King of Israel reported to him that Naaman was on his way. The King freaked out in fear tearing his robes and crying, "Am I God, to give death or life... he is trying to pick a quarrel with me." Elisha, the Prophet hears that the King has torn his clothes and is fearful. He tells the King to send Naaman to him.

This is where the story gets very interesting. Naaman arrives at Elisha's home with servants, chariots and great wealth. But Elisha doesn't even come out to greet him. He sent a messenger to Naaman to tell him, "Go, wash in the Jordan seven times and your flesh will be restored and you shall be clean."

Naaman is furious. He is outraged. He has come a long way and expects acknowledgement of his status and a dramatic cure. The least Elisha could have done is to come out, greet him and anoint him or something. Why tell him to wash seven times in the Jordan? There were many good rivers in Aram. What is so special about the Jordan? Naaman was offended and annoyed that his time had been wasted.

But one of Naaman's servants convinces him to do what the prophet had said to do. Naaman's pride just about prevented him from dipping himself in the Jordan but he did as asked and was cured of his leprosy.

This story raises all kinds of questions for us today – not only questions about a skin ailment being cured by dipping seven times in the River Jordan. It also raises for us questions about how we respond to what may seem to us to be a ridiculous suggestion. It raises questions about how we may be encouraged to do the right thing but pride, stubbornness and fear of ridicule surface to become guardians of our behaviour.

"What is the right thing to do? Whose advice do we listen to? Who is speaking the prophetic word in our ear?"

Many are the prophetic voices of our age tempting us with what seem to be totally reasonable solutions to some of the major concerns confronting our world and future. At times I am sure we feel like Atlas who, in ancient Greek mythology, was condemned to carry the weight of the heavens on his shoulders. Atlas is always pictured bowed under the pressure of his huge task. We also can feel the same as Atlas weighed down with heavy burdens and decisions concerning "What is the right thing to do?" "Who should I listen to for advice?"

Many of those who listened to President Donald Trump as he attempted to overturn the election result are now in prison or before the Courts. President Trump, himself, refused to listen to those who gave him advice that he did not want to hear. Instead he listened to two people – both lawyers and it is now likely that both lawyers will be charged before the Courts.

We must remember that we are not God. Only God is God. We are left with the choice of "What is the right thing to do?" Ours is the freedom to choose and with that choice comes the responsibility of living with the consequences.

I am sure that the seventy (or seventy-two as some accounts state) sent out by Jesus were more than a little unsure of what they had let themselves in for. The number seventy is significant for it is the number of elders who were chosen to help Moses with the task of leading and directing the people in the wilderness. It was the number of the Sanhedrin, the Supreme Council of the Jews; and it was held by the ancients to be the number of the

nations of the world. Which ever way we look at Jesus sending out this number of disciples he, and the Gospel writers, were viewing this as people sharing in Jesus' mission to the world.

Jesus and Elisha were very much people of the same mould – people who gave of themselves in the service of others. Albert Schweitzer was such a man. He was a Nobel Prize winning theologian, philosopher, physician, music scholar and writer. He believed that only those who served others would ever be truly happy. He made his choices and he led by example.

In his twenties Albert Schweitzer wrote outstanding works on Bach, Jesus and the fundamentals of pipe organs. He became an admirable organist, church Minister and theological teacher. At the age of 30 he became aware of the plight of the people in Africa and of their desperate need for medical care. He entered Medical school, graduated as a Doctor and, with his wife, devoted the rest of his life serving the people of French Equatorial Africa.

Out of his experience Albert Schweitzer developed an ethical principle called “reverence for life.” This philosophy spoke to the need for humans to respond to others amidst the experience and needs of living.

What is it that motivated Albert Schweitzer? It was his faith in the God we know in Jesus Christ. That was the force (Holy Spirit) within him for motivation and for change.

Sometimes we can choose to trivialize our lives by listening to the voices which would lead us astray – voices offering a quick fix, something more, something better.

What is the right thing to do?

I believe that God intends us for service, for leadership, for faithfulness to the values that revere life, other people and God. It is this that gives life its true meaning. This Elisha knew. This Jesus knew. And this Naaman found out too- to his great surprise.

To God be the glory. Amen