

*John Docherty, October 9, 2016*  
**Thanksgiving 2016**

When I brought the Thanksgiving message last year, I commented on the fact that I had struggled a little bit trying to understand why the particular Biblical passages had been chosen for that day. They didn't seem to be particularly relevant to a Thanksgiving celebration, and I finally twigged to the fact that the Lectionary, from which the passages had been drawn, was put together in the US, and the date for the Canadian Thanksgiving just wasn't on their radar.

But ... by that point I'd already determined to make it work somehow, so I went with the suggested passages.

This year, somewhat older and, I hope, marginally wiser, I thought I would compare today's passages to those proposed for November 24, the date of Thanksgiving in the US. And, sure enough, the November passages are more obviously Thanksgiving passages, touching on harvest and celebration.

Fortunately, though, the passages that were suggested for today don't need the same kind of creative gymnastics that last year's passages required to make them fit the Thanksgiving theme.

The passage from II Kings and Luke both touch on leprosy, (a Thanksgiving motif if ever there was one. When someone mentions Thanksgiving to you, isn't leprosy the first thing that comes to mind?).

And both passages touch on Samaritans. Granted, Elisha isn't a Samaritan of the sort we meet in the New Testament, but he lives in Samaria, in the northern kingdom of Israel. Samaritans : a people who, in Jesus' time at least, were the outcasts of Israel, the pariahs of the faith, the ones who weren't quite Jews because alongside their worship of Yahweh, they'd absorbed other pagan practices and beliefs; but who weren't quite *not* Jews, which made them even more suspect than those who were clearly and unambiguously outside the faith.

So ... perfect fodder for a melancholy Scot as he works up an appropriately bleak reading of Thanksgiving in 2016.

Well, maybe not so bleak. It *is* Thanksgiving after all, and while both stories include leprosy, it's obviously the healing of the leprosy that takes centre stage.

And while, on one level, the stories are intended to glorify God, who is ultimately responsible for the healing, they both have elements that stir my imagination enough to

generate in me some affection for the one being healed, because in both cases we catch a glimpse of their humanity.

And in that humanity, we catch a glimpse of their vulnerability.

And in that vulnerability, I think we get some clues to the nature of gratitude, and, to borrow some of the title of a hymn from our worship book, a hint of the wideness of God's mercy.

Let's start with the story of Naaman.

I actually like this story very much. It has so many realistic descriptions of the human reactions of the people involved that it has the kind of ring of authenticity and subtlety that allows you to easily identify with the characters. This is not a tidy tale of good guy / bad guy, or a simple picture of a pagan Syrian being awed by the magician Merlin /slash/ Elisha, sitting in an Israelite Camelot, in the company of the brave and wise king of Israel and his round table of shining knights. No, it's more nuanced than that.

It starts off innocently enough with Naaman getting word of a prophet in Samaria who has the power to heal his leprosy. So he quite reasonably approaches the king of Syria and asks permission to go and see this man.

The king, grateful to Naaman for his leadership as general in his army, willingly agrees, and sends Naaman along with a letter of introduction addressed to the king of Israel. Naaman, for his part, takes along wildly generous gifts for Elisha, the prophet : ten talents of silver, six thousand pieces of gold, and, curiously enough, ten changes of clothing.

That last gift struck me as a little anti-climactic after the silver and gold, but I'm guessing they must have been *really nice* clothes. Maybe they included a kilt and sporran ...

Anyway, Naaman arrives and presents his letter to the king of Israel – and here is where the story picks up some of the almost comical elements that ring true as a picture of normal human interactions.

The king doesn't read this letter as an acknowledgement that the God of Israel is powerful and to be trusted. He reads the letter as a ploy to trick him and provide an excuse for a violent reaction on the part of the king of Syria.

“*Whoa!!* He wants me to heal Naaman of his *leprosy* !!?? Is he nuts? I'm not *God!* I don't have that kind of power! It's a trap, and this will *not* end well, I can tell.” He then

tears his clothes as an expression of his great distress. (... ah ... ok ... maybe now I see the importance of the gift of ten changes of clothes ...)

Elisha gets wind of this reaction and sends word to the king to let Naaman come to *him* for healing.

So the king has his Homer Simpson moment : “Doh! Why didn't I think of Elisha!? Of course, *that's* who the king of Syria expects to work this miracle.”

So Naaman comes along to Elisha and stops before his house : him and all his horses, his chariots, a huge entourage.

He expects, of course, to be received with a bit of pomp and ceremony. He's come asking for help, fine, but he's an important man, with luxurious gifts and an expectation of a spectacular display of power.

When Elisha chooses not to come out and meet him, but instead sends a message to him to tell him to go wash in the Jordan he's insulted, angry, and clearly disappointed.

I love Naaman's reaction and the reaction of his servants.

Naaman, the big guy, has his own Donald Trump moment.

“[Are you *kidding* me?!] I thought that for me he would surely come out, and stand and call on the name of the LORD his God, and would wave his hand over the spot, and cure the leprosy! [if I were a prophet that's what I would have done, and it would be *spectacular*; it would be a *beautiful* thing, and it would blow your mind; believe me]”

His servants, on the other hand, are more grounded. They're able to get some perspective on Elisha's instructions. They're able to balance Naaman's hubris with some humility and are able to get him to acknowledge that he'd gladly have done something really difficult if it meant healing his leprosy, so why not do this very simple thing?

And, to his credit, Naaman swallows his pride, goes and bathes in the Jordan, and returns to Elisha a healed man.

And I think this is the point in the story where the Kings passage and the Luke passage intersect with Thanksgiving.

It's the obvious 'Thanksgiving' point, following their healing, that Naaman and the Samaritan in the Luke passage return to the one responsible for their healing to offer thanks. It's a very human gesture of gratitude and recognition.

But it's also the point, in Naaman's case at least, where a profound change occurs in his life, and the expression of gratitude is accompanied by a resolve to follow God in a new way.

And, though we didn't continue reading in that chapter of II Kings, it's also the point where we're offered a glimpse of this man's vulnerability; his flawed humanity.

Because Naaman returns to Elisha and presents him with all of the gifts he's brought along. Elisha, for his part, refuses the gift, as though to say “This wasn't a commercial transaction. No payment is required.”

Naaman then asks for two mule-loads of soil to take back with him to Syria. We're not really told the significance of this request, but one supposes it's an attempt to carry back some connection to the God of Israel, this God that inhabits the land.

Naaman then says to Elisha “... your servant will no longer offer burnt-offering or sacrifice to any god except the LORD. But may the LORD pardon your servant on one count: when my master goes into the house of Rimmon to worship there, leaning on my arm, and I bow down in the house of Rimmon, when I *do* bow down in the house of Rimmon, may the LORD pardon your servant on this one count.’ ...”

It's a curious request from Naaman. The brashness and arrogance are gone, and the vulnerability is there for all to see : “I'll no longer serve any other god, but ... um ... I won't be able to avoid going through the motions when the king asks me to go with him into the pagan shrines ... so ... uh ... do you think I can be given a little bit of latitude there ... ??”

And Elisha doesn't respond with “Absolutely not! You either go the full distance or you drop out of the race altogether!”

He responds instead with “Go in peace.”

There's a gentleness in that response, and I tend to picture an avuncular smile on Elisha's face as he utters the words. It's clear that Naaman's worship of God will be imperfect, but that's okay; it's worship of God, all the same.

In the same way, when Jesus responds to the Samaritan who returns to thank him, there's perhaps a certain sadness that only one of the ten came back, but there's also an appreciation of the fact that this erstwhile leper, this Samaritan, is a person of faith.

A person of imperfect faith, certainly, but a person of faith all the same.

In Naaman's case, he is now a believer who needs to compromise his scruples to some extent in order to survive. The fact that he is now a follower of Yahweh doesn't seem to be a problem in Syria, so long as it doesn't interfere with his official role as attendant to the king.

I think *I* would probably have a problem with that.

But in both of these cases, we don't get any sense that Elisha or Jesus are overly concerned about the specifics of how the objects of their mercy are going to live out their faith going forward.

There seems to be a certain level of trust that they have been sufficiently affected by their healing to ensure that they will at least *try* to follow Yahweh faithfully.

I take a lot of comfort in that.

I take comfort in the fact that my imperfect expressions of gratitude might yet be acceptable to God.

I take comfort in the fact that my imperfect faith may not irreparably harm my relationship to God.

I take comfort in the fact that those around me are just as imperfect in their gratitude and in their faith, but that they are just as acceptable to God as I am.

And, I take comfort in the fact that even a Donald Trump, if he turns and seeks healing for his own particular form of leprosy, may not be irredeemably lost.