

# Faith Rewarded

The sermon given by Rev Sheila Cameron  
at the St Margaret's Sung Eucharist on 9 October 2022.

The readings were: 2 Kings 5:1-5, 7-17; 2 Timothy 2:3-15; Luke 17:11-19



Do you have problems with faith? Jesus tells us we only need a tiny grain of faith, no bigger than a mustard seed, to come to know the power and the love of God working in us, for that faith will explode into new life beyond anything we can imagine. And there is a very close connection between faith and thanksgiving in our Christian lives, illustrated in this morning's readings.

Our faith is frequently absent or put to the test. We see the disciples of Jesus try to emulate the healings of their Master and fail lamentably because they lack faith. They find it difficult to cope in the tempests of life because their faith is weak. The all-too-frequent turmoil in our lives and in the life of the Church is a sign of our very human lack of faith in the Christ who is always with us to still the unruly elements in our minds. We are called to live our lives of discipleship in the calm sea of faith, in the security of Christ's presence, knowing that he will never abandon us. Although "we are faithless, he remains faithful," Paul reminds us in our reading from 2 Timothy.

Our story from 2 Kings is a good illustration of how faith can grow suddenly from the tiniest grain. It has the surreal quality of a folk tale. The characters seem to be symbolic and a bit two-dimensional: there's Naaman the military commander, successful but flawed by a health problem; there are two powerful kings, the king of Aram and the king of Israel, throwing their weight about, flying into rages and taking umbrage at the slightest provocation; there's a little servant girl, unnamed, the most unimportant person in the hierarchy at court but the one who knows where the cure lies for the commander's leprosy; there's a mysterious prophet with superhuman powers who remains aloof and refuses to perform spectacular rituals even at a king's request; there are the commander's servants who persuade him to be sensible and try the remedy, although the process falls far short of his expectations. And then, of course, there's the outcome: the sick warrior is cured and goes home rejoicing.





Throughout this story, wisdom lies with the poor and the humble, with the servants rather than with kings and warriors. The worldly expectation that the powerful have all the answers is firmly refuted. The king of Israel has a fit of rage when he reads the letter from the king of Aram and thinks it's intended to humiliate him: "What? You're asking *me* to cure this leper? Are you trying to show me up?" Then the ailing warrior is offended when the prophet Elisha asks him to go and bathe seven times in the River Jordan: "What?" he says. "In this miserable stream? The rivers at home are a lot better than this!" But the prophet knows where God is to be found, and that isn't always where people expect to find God.

Naaman the successful commander thought that something spectacular had to be done to get God's attention, and especially for *him*, because he was such an important person: "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!" But the elusive prophet Elisha didn't even come out of his house or perform any spectacular rituals at all. And Naaman the warrior was offended. But he received the gift of healing as a reward for the grain of faith he carried with him, obeying the instruction to wash seven times in the River Jordan, and his response was to praise God and make thank offerings to Elisha.

All we need is that tiny grain of faith and the *willingness* to place everything in the hands of God. Don't we have a tendency to make life more difficult for ourselves than is necessary? Don't we assume we have to make extraordinary efforts to increase attendance in our churches? But our efforts on behalf of the church would be in vain

without the gifts of faith and prayer and in vain without the power of God. Some years ago, John Mantle, the former Bishop of Brechin, wrote about taking radical action to "re-invent ourselves" if the church was not to die. We must "embrace change," he said.<sup>1</sup> That sounded a tough exercise and there have been many initiatives in this direction in recent years.

When I was training for ministry in the early 2000s, the Church of England was in the middle of what it was calling a Decade of Evangelism. We were all reading a book called *Mission-shaped Church* and talking about "fresh expressions" of church. Thinking of the plight of many churches in recent years, these efforts didn't seem to bear much fruit in terms of greatly increased numbers in the pews, and several denominations have had to close down many of their buildings as being no longer affordable, but that doesn't mean that the Christian faith is moribund. We may have been powerless to recreate Sunday attendance as it was a generation ago, but the life of the church continues to bear witness to the presence and grace of God in its openness to every individual. The recent lockdowns have forced us to explore new ways of doing things, reaching out to house-bound and isolated worshippers, and have revealed people's hunger for God through the often amazing response to online offerings. Robert Willis, the recently retired Dean of Canterbury, is fond of telling how his daily broadcast of Morning Prayer from the Deanery Garden, with its lively menagerie of animals and birds, grew a world-wide congregation of hundreds of thousands during the pandemic. The total number of viewings on social media of all the videos broadcast by the Cathedral during this time is now estimated as over six million.<sup>2</sup>





We preach the gospel of a Christ alive in the midst of us, calling us to bring the world back to God though nurturing tiny seeds of faith and growing them into a harvest of praise and thanksgiving. And our faith is strengthened daily by awareness of his grace, by the experience of faith rewarded. We who know Christ as our Saviour, who can identify with Christ on the cross, or who have encountered the risen Lord in the course of our life's journey, have an unshakable confidence that he will always be with us and, as we cherish this certainty and live it day by day, we long to share it with all whom we meet.

The story of Naaman the Syrian is a hugely important one for Luke. In chapter 4, we hear Jesus mention it in that celebrated sermon in the synagogue in Nazareth that inaugurated his ministry, the one in which he announced the Spirit of the Lord was upon him. Jesus went on to offend his listeners hugely by reminding them that Naaman, a foreigner, had been healed and had praised the God of Abraham while many Jews raised in the faith had not. The story is echoed again in the tale of the ten lepers, in which the only one who comes back to thank Jesus is a Samaritan, a member of a social group despised by the Jews as well as a man cast out of society on account of his leprosy. There are two points to consider here: first, Luke tells us that God is no respecter of exclusivity; God will not favour those who claim him to be their own to the exclusion of members of other social or religious groups. And second, the greater our misfortune, the greater our joy and thanksgiving when the burden of marginalisation is lifted from us. Only the one who was doubly disadvantaged turned back to thank Jesus for his healing.

As our grain of faith explodes into new life, we praise God because we recognise that “the abundance of God is poured out way beyond the boundaries of the Church”.<sup>3</sup> It is our “vital task to discern this abundance and accept it with joy.” Let us never stop praising God, echoing the words of the prophet Isaiah:

“I will greatly rejoice in the Lord,  
my soul shall exult in my God:  
for he has clothed me in the  
garments of salvation.” (Isaiah 61:10)

Amen.

---

<sup>1</sup> *Inspires*, Autumn 2010

<sup>2</sup> Canterbury Cathedral website (31 March 2021). “*Over 6 million views and counting for Canterbury Cathedral’s online worship*”. <https://tinyurl.com/ykbzasp7>

<sup>3</sup> David F Ford and Daniel W. Hardy (2005). *Living in Praise: Worshipping and Knowing God*, 191

The image of the Cleansing of the ten lepers comes from the Codex Aureus Epternacensis (c. 1035–1040). The scribe/artist is unknown, and the image comes via Wikimedia Commons,