

## **Clothe Yourselves with Humility**

A recent SBS TV Insight program dealt with the topic of 'Remorse'. Three ex-prisoners were asked about their crimes and the impact their crimes had had on others, including their victims. It was harrowing to hear. They were then asked if they felt any remorse for their crimes and what they thought remorse was. Was it genuine or was it contrived to get a lesser sentence? Two judges and some victims contributed. Genuine remorse is being deeply sorry for the wrongdoing, then expressing that to the victims and finally showing by their actions that they would never do that again. One judge described it as 'atoning for their crimes'.

During the Diocese's Year of Lament, these sentiments regarding remorse feed into our assessment of our own wrongdoing and our preparedness to take their impact seriously. One attractive element of the TV program was the honesty and humility shown by the three ex-offenders as they relived their experience before the audience. It was powerful, reality television.

Imagine a TV program being made of our Old Testament reading today. In it similar elements of honest acknowledgement and genuine humility have to happen before restoration and healing can begin. The account of Naaman the leper is vivid and human in its description of his journey to healing by the hand of God. The verses today look at the first part of Naaman's story. There are three different stages in this part.

In the first stage we have a Great Leader who has everything except his health.

(Verse 1 READ)

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There is no doubting Naaman's outstanding ability, loyal service and the high regard in which he was held for his achievements and success. We'd call him a 'National Hero'. And what is more, the Lord God had used him to assist in achieving the Divine purpose.

But there was one thing spoiling all that. It may have been small when compared to all he had achieved, but it was none the less very important. Naaman was a leper. This was a dreadful skin disease that severely affected the limbs and of course it had no known cure. And since it was infectious it severely affected his family and social life.

Here is a picture of much of Western humanity today. Those who have so much in terms of this world, fame, fortune and power, but who lack something important. They have no personal relationship with the Living God. You may have people in mind who fit this description. You may even sense that it could be true of you. People who have so much, almost everything you could ask for, and yet lack one thing that makes them unhappy and discontented. It affects everything.

It may of course not be a health issue or possessions. However it may also be an unresolved long-term relationship breakdown, a bereavement that leaves a scar or some kind of bitter unhappiness that leads to cynicism and despair. Their whole being is consumed by some tragedy. That was Naaman.

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The second stage here is 'A Proud Man who needed humbling'.

This great leader heard from his wife that there is a cure, but he will need to go to the conquered land of Israel and seek out the prophet of God, Elisha. These words of advice come from the faith of their captured servant girl. Never ever underestimate how God can use the straightforward testimony to his presence and power such as this courageous girl showed. Consider, if she hadn't spoken up we would not be looking at this story today!

So this successful leader sets out to find healing for his leprosy. (verses 4–6, READ). This was all you would expect national leaders to do. A letter of introduction, lavish gifts and going right to the top. But the result was disastrous. He went to the wrong person, used the wrong method and had the wrong attitude.

And the response to this request for help? (verse 7, READ). Understandably, the king of Israel saw this as a trap, a provocation to justify further armed conflict, or even another invasion. He felt trapped and could offer Naaman no solution. And in that vivid Old Testament way of describing grief and frustration, 'he tore his robes'. So the king could not help Naaman.

Then when Elisha hears about the king's distress he asks for Naaman to come to him, the prophet of God in Israel. But there is no red carpet treatment at the prophet's place. (verses 8–10, READ). Can you sense Naaman's blood pressure rising? No answers at the palace so he's sent to the prophet's place. No prophet to meet and greet him, but just a messenger with the prophet's message. No dramatic, spectacular demonstration of healing, just instructions to wash seven times in the local river Jordan.

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This whole approach stripped away his status, authority and pride and exposed his need to subject himself humbly to go through this experience of cleansing. And not you notice by the hand of Elisha, but by the hand of God himself (verses 11–12, READ).

We all balk at the bar of humility. But God is really unable to help us in our need until we reach the point of really admitting it is beyond us and wanting his help. There is so much pride in the human soul. Pride in our own resourcefulness. Pride in being able to solve our own problems, thank you! And not admitting we are beaten and need God's help. Human pride shuts God out. When we admit our mistakes, our failures, our sins and, yes our crimes, and throw ourselves on God's mercy, then God can and does help.

Jesus' parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector compares the pride in the Pharisee's heart with the humility in the Tax Collector's. Not, 'God, I thank you that I am not like other men', that is superior, but 'God have mercy on me, a sinner'. Jesus said it was the Tax Collector who went home justified before God. "For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted." (Luke 14:11). Naaman had to learn the truth and reality of humility before God, before God would restore and cleanse him.

Remember that sign over the Army Padre's door. 'Abandon rank all those who enter in.' And that notice outside the church, 'God can do something with broken lives, provided he is given all the pieces'.

Then the third stage of Naaman's story is 'A Humbled Man restored and cleansed'.

Here at last is sweet reasonableness up against a confused, stubborn heart. (verses 13-14. READ).

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Here is the right way for restoration and cleansing. Do as the prophet of God says and you will see God at work. Maybe it was only in the seventh washing that the cleansing became apparent. We are not told. But whatever, the washing was an act of faith and trust in God, in his power to heal. So when Naaman submitted himself to it, he experienced the deep life-changing blessing of restoration and cleansing.

Here is an aspect of our salvation. The place of humility for we cannot save ourselves no matter how much we try and wish we could. We have to be rescued by someone else.

Remember a couple of years ago, those 12 boys and their soccer coach trapped in a cave in Thailand. It made headlines around the world. They were trapped several kilometres underground by rising waters. There was no way they could rescue themselves. They were totally dependent on the rescuers going into the cave and reaching them. It was humbling for them to be rescued and brought out one by one. But how wonderful when it was successfully completed.

Salvation for now and for eternity is when we humbly admit we cannot save ourselves and we put our faith and trust in God and in what he has done to rescue us. God sent his only Son to die on the cross so our sins could be dealt with. Jesus paid the penalty for our sin, and when God raised him from the dead he demonstrated that sins were forgiven and the way through to God was now open.

Naaman had come to the place of humbling himself and accepting God's way for cleansing. For us the way of salvation involves us being humble, accepting what God has done to save us and putting our faith and trust in Jesus Christ alone.

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As we do that now let's remember David's words in Psalm 51. "The sacrifice acceptable to God is a broken spirit: a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise." (Psalm 51:17).