

POWER GAMEs

July 3, 2016

2 Kings

I had to read the story of Naaman and his leprosy and his meandering trip to the prophet several times in order to understand all the possibilities that it held. And, of course, I'm sure there is much more still to be discovered. When I first read it, I saw the story as a demonstration of the development of polytheistic tribal life into monotheism. Naaman sees the god of the Israelites as belonging to them, to the Israelites, but able to do favors for powerful neighbors. All the tribes or groups of tribes had their own gods that took care of their local people, but that could be loaned out, so to speak, for special needs. I saw it as quaint, in a way, as a description of how life used to be in those far off times in the deserts of the Middle East.

But then I saw, as one so often does in these stories, that it has so much more to teach us than a lesson in cultural anthropology. It's about power and influence and money and the limits of those things. And, it's about simplicity and the wisdom achieved with freedom from pretension. As with scientific theory, it shows that the simplest way is the way to the truth. And, it's about, as always, the great mystery of God. It packs so many nuggets into these 14 short verses that, in itself, it's a miracle of efficiency.

Let's look at the characters. First of all we have Naaman, a mighty general, successful in battle and respected by all around him, even by his erstwhile enemies in Israel. He is close to the king of Aram or Syria and he has been

well rewarded for his services. But, the one fly in the ointment is that he has leprosy. And that is kind of a problem.

Then there are the kings of Aram and of Israel, two more powerful players, and, one supposes, used to wrangling with one another.

The king of Aram sends Naaman, his general, to the king of Israel, with a letter of introduction and a lot of money, asking for him to cure his servant Naaman of his leprosy. Doesn't this sound really contemporary – favors exchanged among powerful patrons?

Now these people, these powerful leaders of men and wielders of influence, they get it all wrong, don't they? They are so used to the games that they are accustomed to playing, that they don't take it in when the playing field is different. They don't have a broad enough vision to see when something different becomes part of their environment.

First of all, Naaman would never have gone to Israel had it not been for his wife's slave girl, an Israeli captured in battle, who tells her mistress of the prophet in Israel who can cure Naaman's leprosy. So she becomes a key figure in the story. Then, when he gets there, he doesn't go to the prophet, the source of the promised cure, but to the king, the contact of his patron. The king of Israel thinks he is being insulted or played with by this request. He thinks that his enemies are toying with him. He doesn't realize that the Arameans believe that because he is the king of Israel, he controls the prophets.

Then when Naaman finally gets to Elisha, Naaman is insulted, himself, because he is not accorded the respect that he believes his stature deserves. And, insult upon insult, not only is he asked to wait outside and never even sees the prophet, but the solution that he is given is simply to bathe very thoroughly in the river. Surely he is worth a more elaborate cure than that.

Then of course, it is the servants who finally set him straight... who tell him reproachfully (and wonderfully, I think), “If the prophet had commanded you to do something difficult, would you not have done it? How much more, when all he said to you was, ‘Wash, and be clean’?”

The whole story seems like a Charlie Chaplin or Buster Keaton movie from the silent film days. You can see the kings and generals flapping about and being outraged, while the simple clown stands by gawking at their missing of the point. And, of course, they are missing the point because they are too encumbered by the expectations and complications of their wealth and power to see the avenue available to them.

Now surely much of this must seem familiar to us today. As we watch politicians jumping up and down and often making the most amazing claims while at the same time saying nothing at all; as we watch heads of state bringing their own countries into a frenzy of uncertainty; as we watch vast amounts of national treasure being spent to achieve nothing; and at the same time we see thousands of the world's poorest people in absolute misery, their children dying and their homelands destroyed. It would seem that the answers to these issues would lie in the restraint of the use of our resources, in the simplicity and modesty of our goals. We do not need to be eternally recognized as wealthy, powerful and glorious, as Naaman, the Commander in Chief, had wanted for himself.

In this reading from 2 Kings, there would be no story without the servants, without the slave girl who spoke of God's prophet, without the servants who turned Naaman's pride around. The mighty warrior was made whole by the

power of God and by the intervention of the servants, and that seems to point to staying away from the power grab and going the modest way.

Well, and what is the point anyway?

I think it is that the trappings of our life blind us as they blinded Naaman; that we get used to, and even dependent upon, an exalted sense of ourselves. And this can manifest itself in different ways – it's not just about being rich and famous and influential.

For example, I fancy myself something of a social scientist. I made my living investigating cultural trends and I'm interested in anthropology and history. That's how I saw the story at first, as being about the emergence of certain kinds of social systems. It's not because that's what the story says, but because that's how I like to see myself. So I misunderstood the message of the story. The story is really about the simplest of things – believe that God will help you if you just give yourself up and go down to the river and bathe.

If you remember, earlier in our readings from Kings, Elijah goes out to find God and we are told that he finds God not in the thunder and not in the fire, but in the silence.

God is a great mystery, but just the way science looks for the explanations in the simplest route, so we are led to God not by complications but by simplicity.

It makes me think of why Hindus divide human life into several stages, and in the last stage, we are meant to divest ourselves of all of our worldly goods and responsibilities and go about with a begging bowl seeking to transcend

the senses and find the ultimate reality. It is thus that we achieve truth. It is much like what Jesus told the disciples to do in our reading from Luke today.

The story of Naaman is another way of telling us that “it’s easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than it is for a rich man to enter into the kingdom of God.” It’s not because the riches are necessarily bad in themselves but because we come to believe that their accumulation and care taking are what our lives are about. The story tells us that we must put down all our boxes of treasure and our armor and clothes and get in the river naked. It’s only then that we experience God and we emerge as Naaman did. “His flesh was restored like the flesh of a young boy, and he was clean.”

Let us pray:

Lord,

Give us the will to put away our toys, our treasures, our thoughts of triumphs and bask only in the peaceful knowledge of your presence.

Amen