

Sermon Notes

**St Mark's Anglican Church
South Hurstville**

**Pentecost 6
8 July 2007**

**Preacher
The Reverend Chris Albany
Rector**

Readings: 2 Kings 5.1-14; Psalm 30; Galatians 6.1-18; Luke 10.1-12,17-24

The simple things

Kerith has sent me another joke – now I promise that I won't do this every week but this is one I thought I'd pass on. There is a slight connection to what I want to focus on today!

A minister was completing a temperance sermon. With great emphasis he said, "If I had all the beer in the world, I'd take it and pour it into the river." With even greater emphasis he said, "And if I had all the wine in the world, I'd take it and pour it into the river." And then finally, shaking his fist in the air, he said, "And if I had all the whiskey in the world, I'd take it and pour it into the river."

Sermon complete, he sat down.

The song leader stood very cautiously and announced with a smile, nearly laughing, "For our closing song, Let us sing Hymn #365 'Shall We Gather at the River.'"

KISS is the key word for today. I want to talk to you about KISSing. No not a peck on the cheek, nor the more passionate experience with one's beloved the other kind of KISS – the one that stands for Keep It Simple Stupid.

The formula was simple. A child could understand it. "Go wash yourself seven times in the Jordan and you will be made clean." But the person receiving this simple formula was not a simple man. Naaman was a great general in the Syrian Army. His greatness is disclosed in the fact that he was the commander of the King's army despite being a leper.

Had Naaman been an Israelite, he would have been required to live apart from everyone else. Apparently as a Syrian, he didn't, but his disease was still considered both hideous and incurable. According to this scripture, he, and his king, were willing to pay millions of dollars, measured in today's currency, if the disease could be cured.

After a couple of twists in the story, Naaman presents himself before the humble home of Elisha the prophet, millions of dollars in hand to pay for the cure he so desperately wants. . . and Elisha won't even come to the door! Instead, Elisha sends a servant to give the great general the simple formula. "Go and wash in the Jordan seven times, and you will be healed."

And Naaman is furious. He has travelled a great distance to get a cure for his terrible disease. He is prepared to pay millions of dollars and, as one of his servants points out, he is prepared to perform any number of difficult tasks to receive this gift from God. But he is unprepared for the simple formula offered by Elisha. "Go and wash in the river, and you will be healed."

It was all too simple. He thought Elisha was mocking him. Trying to make him appear foolish. The great general bathing in the muddy waters of the Jordan at the command of a Hebrew prophet. One can sympathise with him too, because Elisha could be rude and arrogant at times, and I think his

refusal to even meet Naaman was a rather ungracious and unnecessary act, not at all consistent with the gracious hospitality Jesus commended in our gospel reading (Luke 10:1-11, 16-20).

Fortunately, Naaman lets himself be persuaded. And the story tells us that Naaman walked from the waters not only healed in his body, but also giving praise to the one true God of all the earth.

There's another reason I sympathise with Naaman. It was too simple... He nearly missed out on the healing because it was too simple.

It was a simplistic as the Church saying that if we are dipped into water in the name to the triune God, we'll be healed of sin and united to Christ. Ridiculous, too simple. How could such a simple act possibly have such extraordinary consequences? Too simple to take seriously really, isn't it? . . . But Naaman was healed.

It's easy to ignore the simple easy things they seem too simple to bother with. We imagine they can't be of much value.

But when you think about relationships, whether with God or with some significant other in your life, it's the simple things that determine whether or not they are healthy and life-giving. If, in relating to my wife, Pam I put all my energy into the big events — the birth of a baby or an annual holiday or her birthday dinner or something — and didn't bother with the ordinary, day to day, little things of relating, the relationship wouldn't last long. It's the ongoing little things, that seem too simple to be significant, that keep the relationship growing and that provide the context to enable the big things to happen.

Most of what we do in here, Sunday by Sunday, is relatively simple. You don't need to climb any high mountains, or fast for forty days, or trek across the continent on your knees. That's not to say that pilgrimage's like the one Kerith and Ann shared with us last week aren't valuable. As we heard from them they most certainly are, it's just that they aren't a must do for all of us! We simply gather with companions, sing some songs, pray some prayers – most of which are the same each week, listen to some ancient stories, break some bread and share some wine. All simple stuff. Perhaps Naaman wouldn't have bothered. Perhaps sometimes we wonder why we bother. . . . But Naaman was healed.

There are long established traditions of spiritual disciplines in the Christian church and they are the pathways which generations of deeply spiritual people have found to be the ways of spiritual growth and holiness. And none of them are particularly difficult sounding things. I skipped them for years because they were so simple I think I assumed they wouldn't be of any value. It would take something much more major to transform me.

One of those disciplines is Silence. What could be simpler? You don't have to do anything. Just turn off the noise and sit and be. Just say "OK God this is your time. I'll just sit here. You do what you wish," and be silent. What could be simpler? Well, for a people who are used to noise and dazzling high-tech stimulation, just being in silence is not nearly as easy as it sounds. But it is when we can slow ourselves down and immerse ourselves in the silence that we are likely to have our most profound encounters with the Spirit of God. You remember the story of Elisha's predecessor, Elijah and how when he wanted to hear God speak he expected to hear God in the big dramatic things, the earthquake, the wind and the fire, it was actually in what the Bible describes as the sound of sheer silence that he encountered God and was transformed.

The prayer form known as "Examen", or "Review of the Day" is simply taking some time to review each day and look for the signs of grace and the signs of challenge from God in it. It is a discipline

that aims to develop our ability to recognise what God is doing. We often don't notice what we haven't taught ourselves to be aware of. You could easily walk across the park without being aware of any birds, even though they are there. But if you develop a practice of always looking for them, then you'll notice them every time. Examen is just like that – it is developing the practice of looking for God in each day so as not to just overlook or take for granted what God's Spirit is doing within and all around you.

And in our relating to one another, do we do the simple things; its easy to make the effort when there is an obvious crisis, tragedy strikes we rally around, visit in hospital; cook a casserole; attend the funeral – but do we keep in touch, make the phone call; acknowledge the little things others do. All these things are very simple sounding things. Too simple for me and Naaman – I still have trouble getting myself to take them seriously at times.

Even the Eucharist is a simple kind of thing – there is nothing complex or dramatic about ordinary bread and wine. God has come to us in simple things – water, bread, wine. God is going to keep calling us to do the simple things and in them will lie all the glorious gifts of God. Let's not go storming back to Aramea in a tantrum because it was all too simple.

Those simple little things seem so unlikely to yield any fruits, and those big impressive things seem to be much more promising. But Elijah didn't hear the voice of God in the storm or the earthquake or the bushfire, but in the sound of sheer silence. And Naaman wasn't healed by paying millions of dollars and crawling up a mountain on his knees. But he was healed . . . when he swallowed his pride and applied himself to the simple little things.

The road to life in all its fullness is made up of little steps, most of them seeming so insignificant as to seem irrelevant to our hoped for destination. A dip in some ordinary water. Listening to stories from long ago. Some regular silence and prayer. Sharing ordinary bread and wine. And as Paul said in our reading from Galatians (6:1-16), there will always be people trying to complicate it by telling us we need to add this that or the other thing, things bigger and more impressive. All that really matters though, he says, is that you are a new creation. And as Jesus said in the gospel reading we heard (Luke 10:1-11, 16-20), you might occasionally see some spectacular consequences of your participation in his mission, but don't go getting carried away and making them the measure of your relationship. The real cause for celebration is the little things — “rejoice that your names are written in heaven.” It might seem ridiculously simple next to seeing Satan fall from heaven like lightning, too simple to be of any consequence . . . But Naaman was healed. God's gift of life is simply too good to miss

With acknowledgement to two sermons on the 2 Kings 5 by Nathan Nettleton of the South Yarra Baptist Church “Keep it simple, Stupid” and “Too simple to bother” see his Website Laughing Bird Liturgical Resources at <http://www.laughingbird.net>