

INSPIRED BY LOVE AND ANGER

2 Kings 5:1-14

Mark 1:40-45

In one reading of Mark's gospel, when Jesus met the man with leprosy who asked him for help he was moved, not with compassion, or pity, as our translation says, but, as the footnote indicates, he was filled with anger. He heals the man out of anger and indignation. I don't think that it was the man, as a man, who angered him, but his pitiable condition: his outcast status (necessary to prevent the spread of the disease), his suffering and his loss of dignity.

There is a lot of emotion around Naaman's illness as well. There is the natural longing of Naaman and his household - including his captured slave girl - that he should be cured and made whole. After all, leprosy is not just an isolating disease, it is a slow, painful death-sentence. So Naaman wants to be made whole, and his overlord shares this wish. Then there is the fear and anger of the Israelite king. He doesn't see the request to provide Naaman with a cure as a genuine approach, but, knowing that the Arameans were Israel's natural enemies, he sees a subtlety that could lead to war. Finally there is Naaman's own anger, anger that he is not treated with the respect that he thinks he deserves. How dare the man of God not come to see him? How dare he just send a message, and such a demeaning one at that - to bathe seven times in the local river? Lots of emotion, negative, angry emotion, driving events forward, and almost preventing the cure from being made.

One of the things which I see very often is the emotional impact of illness and suffering, and anger is never very far away. Leprosy is no longer the scourge it once was, not in this country, and because of the work of organisations like the leprosy mission, not in most countries now. But there are other illnesses which have the same effect of isolation, despair, of making a person untouchable, as well as bringing their own physical pain.

There is HIV, which arrived with a stigma so great that for a long time it could not be mentioned in churches, and which is still so unmentionable in many of the countries where it is most prevalent, that prevention and detection are sometimes well-nigh impossible. As the Rev. Dr. Robin Hill, who is the Convener of the Church of Scotland HIV/AIDS Project wrote in a recent publication:

Back in 1988 the world was struggling to come to terms with the reality of Aids. From the outset this "mystery illness" became the stuff of shock headlines and profoundly unhelpful buzzwords started to be used which attracted attention in all the wrong ways. Whether seen as some kind of gay plague, or else viewed as God's vengeance on an unfaithful generation, HIV at once became tarred with all sorts of inappropriate brushes. And, sadly, when tar sticks, it sticks good and proper.

That's HIV, which we don't hear about so much in this country (although it is still present among us, so that in itself says something about its untouchable status) but which is decimating our friends in sub-Saharan Africa, and spreading fast in Asia.

In this country Dementia of various sorts can have a similar effect of cutting people off, because the wider community doesn't know how to deal with them, or their condition. Mental illness is another such condition. I hate visiting in psychiatric units because sometimes it seems people are herded there together to keep them away from us,

rather than for any other reason. And with these forms of mental illness we can also think of depression or even grief. All conditions which isolate because the wider community doesn't know what to do, is embarrassed by their own ignorance, sees the condition, and not the person.

And so anger springs up around illness. The sufferers themselves may well feel angry: angry that they have this condition, angry that no one seems to be able to help, angry that they are isolated from normal life. But their families may also feel anger: anger at themselves for letting down their spouse or parent or child; or anger at the system which can't or won't do more to help; anger - and this one brings with it feelings of guilt as well - anger that the person has got sick and so the comfortable routines of home and family are disrupted. Illness bursts the bubble in which we like to live, the bubble of unreality which says that nothing bad can ever happen to us: such things, illness and death, happen only to others

Underneath it all is often a feeling of injustice. Why should I get sick, or my child, or spouse, when no one else does - or when most other people don't? Why should this happen to me or to us? What did we do to deserve this? (With the unspoken answer, "Nothing, of course.") How is this fair?

Those are natural, though often unanswerable questions. There are other issues of injustice around illness as well. We talk of the postcode lottery for certain types of treatment, so that some things are available in one part of the country and not in others, or available in Scotland but not in England, or vice versa. But there is also, even more starkly, the national lottery: where we can spend significant sums on palliative care, (which will not cure but can make life more bearable, and therefore is not to be sneezed at) while in Zimbabwe, for instance, there are no drugs at all. That too isn't fair, and withdrawing palliative care here wouldn't improve the justice.

When Jesus healed the man with leprosy he was moved with pity, maybe, but it was a sort of fierce compassion, an anger brought on by this one human reminder of the imperfect state of the world. It is not the only time we see Jesus angry: think of the time that he turned over the tables in the temple. And when we see Jesus angry it reminds us that anger is in itself not wrong, so long as the action to which it drives us is not evil, but constructive. So Jesus, in compassionate rage, heals the man of his suffering. And this healing is all of a piece with the message which he is preaching: the message that the Kingdom of God has come: anger is part of the Kingdom reaction to injustice, including the injustice of disease, anger that leads to positive action.

Leprosy is a wasting disease, where parts of the body grow numb and useless, and then, through injury which is not felt so not realised, can grow ulcerated and thus poison spreads in the whole system. When Jesus healed the man of his leprosy it would be obvious. Wounds and withered flesh would be renewed. He was made whole again. The same thing would happen to Naaman: his body would be renewed, made whole. This making whole is the work of God's Kingdom in the world. It was then and it still is.

Those who work to help the victims of HIV labour on many levels to bring health to the infected, and help to the families. Those who are infected can be helped to continue to lead full lives, by use of a combination of antiretroviral drugs, good nutrition and befriending. The children and parents of those who have been made very ill or who have died also need help, not only in coping with their emotional distress, but also, often with the physical impact of a missing generation in the family. That is what we do: we,

you and I, through the Church of Scotland HIV/AIDS Project. We seek to bring wholeness to lives that would otherwise be blighted.

It's what we need to try to do, and not be afraid, with those who live with other outcast conditions: to get alongside those with dementia, and their families who find it so hard to cope, physically or emotionally. We need to be people with a firm grasp of the realities of life, so that when we see others having to cope with their bubbles bursting, we are able to show them that God's love is still there, that life, which has changed, is still good and full. And that takes a lot of honesty and it isn't easy. But then Jesus never said that the Kingdom of God was going to be easy to bring in. After all, it took his very life.

When Naaman the Aramean was made whole his reaction, in the continuation of the story which we didn't read this morning, was to want to turn to Israel's God in worship. He was so determined to do this, that he even asked Elisha if he could take home some soil from Israel to remind him who he was worshipping from now on.

When the man with leprosy met Jesus he knelt at his feet, a sign of worship. He knew that he was asking for wholeness and he knew who could give it, and so he knew who he was dealing with and he worshipped. Later he worshipped in a different way, by refusing to shut up about Jesus and his wonderful power.

When wholeness is brought to others in Christ's name, with specific Christian love, even love inspired by anger, then worship is the natural reaction. I think that too often as Christians we shy away from allowing ourselves to *feel* the injustice of illness, the anger that it inspires. But Jesus did not put anger away. He allowed it to fuel his compassion, to drive his actions, to spur him on to bring in God's Kingdom in word and deed. And so for those who approached him, wholeness came, and worship followed.

May we be those who allow ourselves to realise the feelings of others, to be made indignant on their behalf, to use our emotion to drive our loving compassion, and so who bring in God's Kingdom in word and deed. May this be our acceptable worship and service to the Lord of life, who was inspired by love and anger.