

Today we have eleven miracles to consider, and possibly a twelfth. I'll leave you to decide that at the end. All eleven concern healing, and all involve the disease described as leprosy. True leprosy is a very nasty disease. It's caused by bacteria and can be dormant for years, but eventually it results in characteristic pale skin patches, progressive nerve damage and various deformities. It can now be easily cured with a combination of antibiotics, but for thousands of years before that, people were terrified of it. Because it is contagious, sufferers were isolated from their communities and confined to leper colonies or special hospitals. In the Middle Ages lepers had to carry a bell to ring to warn other people to get out of their way and avoid any contact. Churches often had a 'leper's squint' – a small window which allowed the leper to see the altar and take part in the service from outside, without the risk of contaminating the congregation. Every culture had rules for isolating lepers; the ancient Jewish one was set out in the book of Leviticus. Not only was the leper to be isolated but anyone who touched a leper became unclean themselves – and there was also the assumption that the leper was being punished by God for sin. So to be leprous had moral as well as physical implications.

After all that you may well wonder how Naaman could possibly have been a successful soldier and the commander of the Aramean army. If he had real leprosy and the disease was well-advanced, he couldn't. But medical knowledge was much less sophisticated 2,500 years ago, and all sorts of skin diseases were lumped together under the same name. There is a whole range of diseases that he might have had, and some of them were relatively easy to cure. One thing that works well for some skin problems is sulphur, and the waters of the Jordan contain sulphur. So Elisha's advice to Naaman might have been very sensible on a purely practical level: wash seven times in sulphurous water and your disease will clear up.

This sounds as though I'm arguing that it wasn't a miracle at all. Elisha was just good at recognising a particular problem and knowing what to do about it. But that's not the miracle, although Naaman clearly thought it was. There is more to this episode than is at first apparent. To begin with, Naaman's wife had a servant-girl who had been captured from the Israelites. Not only had she heard about Elisha, but she had the courage to suggest to her mistress that Naaman should go to him. And Naaman's wife listened, and then she convinced him. That in itself is fairly extraordinary.

There are three verses missing at this point. The next thing we hear is that the king of Israel reads a letter. What letter? (It sounds like the plot for an opera!) But Naaman's boss, the Aramean king, had given him a letter to take to the king of Israel to ask him to cure Naaman. Given that the Israelites and the Arameans were bitter enemies, no wonder the Israelite king was suspicious and angry. Anyway, Naaman ended up at Elisha's house, and then he was insulted because the prophet just sent a message telling him what to do. But then the second part of the miracle happened – his servants had the courage to intervene with some advice, and Naaman listened.

This isn't really a story about leprosy being healed. It's a story about pride and arrogance being healed. Naaman was a hugely important man who gave orders, led the army, expected to be listened to, taken seriously and obeyed. He had swaggered up with his horses, chariots, outriders, guards and servants to see some hairy prophet living in a very ordinary house – and he was virtually ignored. Yet, despite his initial anger, he had the humility to listen to his servants and take their advice, just as he had initially listened to the advice his wife had been given by her maid. And he then had the humility to go back to Elisha, with his entire retinue,

and admit that he had been wrong and the prophet and his God had been right. That must have taken some doing. As it says in this morning's psalm: 'The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.'

Look at the words of that psalm for a moment. It's full of thanksgiving, rejoicing in God for what he has done and giving public praise: 'I will give thanks to the Lord with my whole heart, in the assembly of the upright, in the congregation.' That's what Naaman did, in front of all his people, and that is what the tenth leper did, in our gospel reading. There were ten lepers who approached Jesus, but they had to shout to him; they couldn't come close, not just from fear of infection but because any contact would make Jesus and his disciples unclean. Jesus heard them, even from that distance, just as God hears anyone who calls out to him in hope, no matter how far away, literally or spiritually, they may be. Jesus called back to them, responding to their need, and they were healed as they went away. Just one came back, and this time he came straight up to Jesus and threw himself at his feet, knowing in himself that he was now clean. He didn't need the priests to tell him; Jesus's word was enough. He was the one who said thank you, and he was the one who had most to be thankful for. Not only had he been an outcast because he was a leper, but he was an outcast from Jewish society because he was a Samaritan, conventionally not one of God's chosen people. But he was the one who gave thanks in front of everyone. He was the one for whom the fear of the Lord had been the beginning of wisdom. He had been doubly restored to full humanity.

There is another message too. The key players in both stories are 'small' people; those on the margins, without status or influence – the maid, the servants, the Samaritan. They were the ones who pointed to what God could do, and had wisdom which could so easily have been overlooked. 'Fear of the Lord' isn't apprehension or terror; it is paying attention to God's message and allowing ourselves to be guided by it, no matter how unlikely the direction or the messenger from whence it comes.

And that twelfth miracle? When I was checking back I discovered that I had never, in twenty-five years, preached on this set of readings. I had nothing to go on and had to start completely from scratch. Despite all the other current complications and distractions, God has yet again provided me with something to say to you. So I too will give thanks to God with my whole heart, in the congregation.