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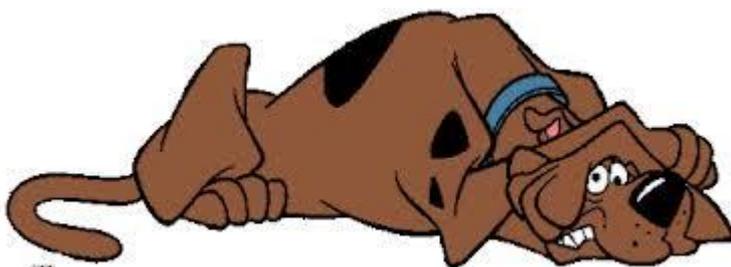
How God uses us where we are – 2 Kings 5:1-19a

Naaman and the servant girl

We're beginning a new sermon series today – how God uses us where we are. So let me start by posing a question. How do you think God uses those who are followers of Jesus? I think there's a bunch of us Christian laden down with guilt because we have a wrong picture of how God uses us. We think that how God uses us must always look like this:-



Successful and energetic evangelism that reaches hundreds for the Lord. When our own experience doesn't match up we feel a little like this



Wanting to hide. Hoping that no-one will notice that we're not speaking to large crowds in tents somewhere in the Mid West of America or in Welsh mining villages or other places where revivals happen.

Well, I hope in this sermon series you'll be encouraged. Over 6 weeks we're going to look at 7 people and how God uses them in the situation they're in. They are:-

- A servant girl far from home who helps her kidnappers;
- An official who has a serious dilemma;
- Someone told by God to explain the Bible to a traveller;
- Someone starting a major construction project;
- A daughter in law who sticks with her mother in law when most would have left;
- Someone who carries on praying when to do so carried a death sentence;
- The most reluctant leader in the Bible; and
- A queen who flouted royal protocol to ask her husband to dinner.

I've got the first two of those today – the servant girl far from home who helps her kidnappers and the official who has a serious dilemma, and every week over the summer we'll be looking at another one of these characters from the Bible. I hope you'll be encouraged by what you hear – that God can use us in whatever situation we're in, sometimes in dramatic ways, sometimes in fairly mundane ways. We can be ambassadors for Jesus without needing to live in an embassy or be employed by a church.

This morning we're going to read my favourite story in the Bible, or most of it – please turn up to 2 Kings 5: 1-18. Or actually the first half of verse 19.

[read]

A great story. A story of one man being restored through having to humble himself. I could preach for a long while on this story, but this morning we're only going to look at the very

beginning and very end of it because in those bits we find examples of how God works through individuals in very different circumstances. First, we're going to look at the actions of the young girl mentioned in verses 2 and 3 and then we're going to look at the exchange between Elisha and Naaman in verse 17 and 18.

So, the young girl first. Look with me at verses 2 and 3. What we see from this is that when God uses us it can be:-

- Surprising;
- Small; and
- Risky.

So, surprising.

SURPRISING

I don't know if you've ever felt out of your comfort zone and a very small fish in a very large pond. I still remember my first day at Bedford school, when I was 7. I went into the playground. I was feeling really nervous. I turned the corner into the main school playground only to find myself next to a wall with some ten year old boys throwing a small rubber ball against the wall. I was next to the wall and these boys were not going to stop their game just because I was next to the wall. I remember trying to run out of the way as their throws came in. It was not the easiest start to my school career and I thought – keep your head down, get to the school building, let's hope nothing bad happens. That's a pale reflection of what the young girl mentioned in verse 2 must have thought. The story doesn't record how old she was, but pretty young it seems. She had been kidnapped from her family and taken from her country to serve her enemy. How would she have felt? Resentful, doubtless. Fearful certainly. And yet, it is this girl, this servant, that God uses to point Naaman to Elisha, God's prophet, to get his leprosy cured. Someone out of their comfort zone. A servant, not anyone high ranking. That's surprising

Secondly, when God uses us it can be small.

SMALL

When the servant girl speaks, does she explain the Ten Commandments to her mistress? Does she go through the story of creation step by step? No. She sees the need for Naaman to be cured of leprosy and she knows of someone who has the power to heal him. She says to her mistress – if only Naaman would go to see him. That’s all. Almost a throwaway line. And yet, as a result of this passing comment, Naaman becomes a servant of the true God of Israel and someone at the beating heart of his country’s power has his heart turned towards God. Small acorns and mighty oaks.

Thirdly, the servant girl took a risk.

RISKY

Naaman was desperate to be cured of his leprosy. If he had not been too fussed about it he would not have taken notice of what a foreign servant girl had said. Instead, he took her suggestion to his boss to ask for permission to travel – not just to the next town but to *another country* – to see if he could get healed from this dreadful disease that he had which made him unclean in the society where he held such an important position. Now, imagine if he had seen Elisha and had not got healed. How do you think it would have gone for the servant girl when he got back? Maybe he would have thought that she had made her suggestion in spite, in getting her own back for having been kidnapped from her family by sending him on a wild goose chase. At the very least Naaman and his wife would not have trusted what she said again. More likely they would have been angry at having been given false hope and having travelled a long way for no good reason.

God used the servant girl in a surprising, small and risky way. He uses us in the same way.

God can use us in surprising situations.

SURPRISING

We might feel out of our comfort zone like I was on my first day of school. We might be struggling just to keep our head above water. We might feel that we have nothing to offer. But God uses the servant girl when she had been kidnapped and had been taken to a foreign land. God does not always use us when we are 'well set'. God uses us when we are not well set, when we do not feel in control of our situation, when we are a long way from home. Maybe there's sometimes a feeling that the best way in which we serve God is when we're on a rota – a preaching rota, a visiting rota, a rota to cook food for a new family. God does use people through organised activities, of course, but also through unplanned things, when we're least expecting it. When we feel least equipped. When we're afraid, or hurting, or distressed. The Bible says that God used Joseph when he was in prison. God used Daniel when he was in exile. God used Moses to speak with Pharaoh when he could barely string a proper sentence together, let alone argue with a king.

Secondly, God uses small things.

SMALL

What persuaded me to come back to this church was something that happened in my first visit. It wasn't the quality of the music, it wasn't the quality of the preaching, it wasn't the wonderful work this church did with the young people of the neighbourhood. It was that when the kids went out, someone called Tony, who came from Dublin, who was sitting in front of me, turned round, smiled and said hello. That's all. That's what persuaded me to come back. Now, you may not be able to play a musical instrument, you may struggle with teaching Sunday school, you may feel that you'd be responsible for food poisoning on a massive scale if you tried to cook a church lunch. But could you smile at someone and say hello? Could you do it on a Sunday morning to someone here for their first time? Could you do it to a neighbour in the street who has just moved in? Could you do it to someone having a hard time? Whenever anyone moved into my parents' street when we were growing up, Mum would make a cake and would take it round to say hello and welcome. I know many of you are excellent bakers. Little things. I've seen this from many of you. I've seen a family taking round fish and chips to an elderly neighbour. I've seen another family befriend an elderly neighbour who is mourning the death of his wife. Little things. Does God only use

us when we explain the Christian gospel by drawing *Two Ways To Live* on a table napkin? No. He uses the packed lunch of a boy to feed 5,000 people. Little things.

Finally, God calls us to take risks.

RISKY

The servant girl was confident that Naaman would get healed by visiting Elisha, and if he hadn't got healed, it wouldn't have gone well for her. If we reach out to someone, by showing them kindness, there's a risk that we get thought of as overstepping a mark, or being weird. Are we prepared to take that risk? There's also the chance that we bring hope or friendship to someone sorely in need of it. So are we going to avoid risk at all times? I've often felt weird or ill at ease welcoming neighbours when they've moved in. I've had to pretend to be confident. On a few occasions I think the neighbours felt pretty weird too. How about if we invite someone to a church service? There's always the risk that the style of service jars with the visitor, that the preaching is a bit whacky, that no-one says hello. Does that mean that we should never bring anyone in? No. We should take risks. I'm not talking about doing what someone did once, which is to start singing "Shine Jesus Shine" loudly on a commercial flight thinking that in some way that was an appropriate way to draw attention to the gospel. I'm talking about reaching out to people and having more concern about their physical and spiritual wellbeing than looking awkward or foolish. Taking a risk is hard if your identity depends on your popularity or your image. The great thing is that the gospel tells us that we have our identity in being a follower of Jesus, in knowing that we will spend eternity with him. Most people get their meaning and identity through their security on earth, through their relationships on earth, or through how they come across on earth. Reaching out to others can risk all that. We don't have so much at risk because our identity isn't found in those things. God places his love for others in our hearts, which compels to reach out to others out of compassion, and not to avoid doing so through embarrassment.

We can learn from the servant girl as to how God uses us where we are. But I wanted to leave some time to look at the end of the story as well and how Naaman will behave when he

returns to Syria, because here we see another example of a believer engaging in the world around him. This time, it shows us an example of someone who is a believer but has a problem because of what he does and where he does it. So, let's consider - Naaman has had a life-changing experience. He has become a believer in God. Look at verse 15 – Naaman says “Now I know there is no God in all the world except in Israel”. Look at verse 17: Naaman says that he won't make burnt offerings and sacrifices to any God except the God of Israel. But there's a problem – which we see in this rather strange mention of the temple of Rimmon in verse 18.



Naaman asks Elisha's forgiveness for bowing down to Rimmon. Wikipedia tells me that “Rimmon” was another name for “Baal”, which is a god mentioned several times in the Bible. Baal is usually mentioned as a rival to God – at various points the people of Israel turn from God and worship Baal. This leads to punishment from God. The Bible tells us that God demands that he alone is the god that his people should worship, and that judgment will fall on those who follow other gods. Recently we looked at the book of 2 Corinthians where there is a clear command to the people of God not to take part in ceremonies involving idols – other Gods. The command is “come out from them and be separate”. God takes this very seriously.

So Naaman says to Elisha – “look, there’s one problem – my job as commander of the army means that at various times I need to attend the temple of Rimmon/Baal with the king, and when he bows down to this god, I need to as well”. What might we have expected Elisha to say? “You must be joking! I know you’ve only been a believer in God a few minutes, but you need to realise that that’s it – there’s no more bowing down to foreign gods. Haven’t you just said that you’re only going to serve the God of Israel?”. What does he actually say? “*Go in peace*”. That’s the equivalent of saying “OK”. Why would God’s prophet allow this?

Well, who knows. It’s puzzling. Doubtless if Naaman had refused to go to the temple with the king then that would have been the end of his job as commander of the army and maybe the end of his life too. But God often calls Christians to put themselves at risk to do the right thing. Maybe Elisha saw that Naaman could have great influence in a godless place as a new believer and that not taking part in these rituals would put that at risk. But again, that doesn’t often wash as an excuse for us to continue doing things forbidden by the Bible just because it will place us in positions of power. Maybe there’s a clue in the fact that Naaman is adamant that he will only serve and worship God, and Elisha sees that his new faith is strong enough so that when he takes part in this stuff in Rimmon’s temple it won’t affect him. But for many new believers who are in a toxic environment the advice would surely be to get out of it.

We’re not given the answer here as to why Naaman’s suggestion was accepted by Elisha. But what this does tell us is two things. This sermon series is called how God uses us where we are. And the first thing we learn is that where we are can sometimes be a very difficult place to be for a believer. Somewhere that threatens the basic bits of your faith. Naaman didn’t choose to go to the temple of Rimmon. He had to. He still had to after his healing and his decision to serve God. How many of us believers face difficult challenges to our faith because of where we are and what we do? I work in the money markets and, my my, what a toxic environment that can be for a believer. Banks may not call themselves temples to money, but that is surely what they are. And the Bible says that you cannot serve God and money. Maybe you’re in a different situation where it is also difficult to be a believer. When we become a Christian our troubles aren’t magically solved.

The second thing we learn is the power of having mature Christians to advise us. Naaman took his problem to Elisha. Elisha sent him on his way with a word of peace, not rebuke. We have each other. We have relationships in this church that may be new or may have developed over many years. We have small groups to discuss items and share issues we are struggling with. If your small group is like mine, then the format of the small groups may not make them the best place to spend lots of time going into issues like Naaman faced, but the relationships we build up with the men and women in our groups mean that we can meet up and wrestle together with these issues. Others may have useful insights into how we can be in the situation but stay pure, stay grounded in our faith.

I'll give two modern day examples in case this is in any way relevant to you. One which directly relates to Naaman's situation here, and one which is less directly relevant. Firstly, one which is directly relevant to someone bowing down in a temple.



My father deals a fair bit in the Muslim world. He tells me that in certain countries when a Muslim wife and mother becomes a Christian, they are given an adviser, who is an experienced and mature Christian with a deep understanding of Islam and the culture. The adviser's advice to the woman is for her to continue to go to the mosque and take part in services there, and not to say anything about their faith. The risks to themselves and their family are too great. Only the adviser knows that she is a Christian and the adviser

themselves is advised by two counsellors who know of the situation but not who the woman is. And lots of prayers are made. The idea is that, as the Holy Spirit changes the woman, her husband notices and asks her why she is no longer treating him with disrespect or shouting at the kids. That is the opportunity for her to share her faith, carefully and under supervision. The key is the faith in the Holy Spirit to transform lives and the guidance given by mature Christians with an understanding of the situation.

Another example which I heard in a sermon from Tim Keller.



He preaches at a church in New York where many of the people that attend are finance professionals. One of them had a situation in the investment bank he worked in where a deal was being discussed with a company which did things he disagreed with. He didn't want his firm to deal with this company. This man's pay was made up mostly of bonuses from deals done by the bank. With help from his Christian friends he came up with a solution which was this. He said to his colleagues – "I will vote against us doing this deal but if I lose, I will work as hard if not harder than anyone else, but I do not want any reward for it. I want no

part of any bonus that comes from this deal.” Now consider – he is in a temple, not of Rimmon, but of money, and taking part in something which involves a client which does bad things. He could have resigned his job and walked away. But he stayed and made a stand. A stand that meant what money he would have had from the deal was instead shared amongst his colleagues. Are they going to have more or less respect for his beliefs as a result? Are they going to be curious about what is so important that he gives us a large part of his income? A creative solution, arrived at with others.

I don't know if either of the two examples of the servant girl or Naaman chime with you. Maybe not. If not, hopefully other talks in this series will. But we have a great commission from God. We are his hands and his feet on the earth. Like the servant girl, how you are his hands and feet may be surprising, small and risky. Like Naaman, it may involve working things out in a difficult situation with the help of others. It may be something different. Let's work together and share ideas and encouragements – each of us has something to offer. God wants to use each of us where we are.