

Sunday 17<sup>th</sup> October – St Luke – Healing.

2 Kings 5:1-14

Acts 3:1-16

Mark 2:1-12

Statistics show that while only a very small percentage of the population regularly go to church, more than half of adults pray. At some time. In some way. They pray.

And perhaps in these last 18 months through the pandemic that figure may well have risen. When things are hard; when loved ones are ill; when we don't know which way to turn; when all seems lost. These are times we turn to prayer. Spoken prayers, silent prayers, simple prayers, formal prayers. But prayers.

What do we expect to happen when we pray? Do we think the situation will change? Do we expect the terminal cancer (or whatever it is) to disappear? Do we think the things that are concerning us will simply go away?

My guess is that while we might hope for these things, deep down we don't expect a miracle to happen. We don't expect things to change. But we still pray.

Today our readings are about miracles. Miraculous healings. Times when things did change.

The story of Naaman. The foreign general who was healed of his leprosy when he immersed himself in the River Jordan as the prophet Elisha had told him. The prophet's prayers for Naaman were answered. The leprosy left him. He was clean.

The story of the lame man who begged day after day outside the temple gate, not asking to be healed but begging for money for food and his very existence. Peter and John passed by. They had no money to give him, but they prayed for him in the name of Jesus. And he was healed. The man who had not been able to walk was now walking and leaping.

And the story of the paralysed man. Whose friends were so confident that their request to Jesus would be answered – their prayer if you like – that they lowered their friend through the roof of the house so that he would be seen by Jesus. And he was healed. This man who had been paralysed could walk again.

Three stories. Three miracles. Three times when things happened as result of prayer. Three times when God intervened in the ordinary world of mortals and things changed.

But more happened here than we might see at first glance. More than Naaman being healed of leprosy; more than the lame man walking; more than the paralytic's limbs being given new strength.

The story of Naaman continues with him going back to the prophet Elisha and praising God. He recognises that the God of Israel is the one true God and he responds by worshipping him. Naaman's life and his priorities are turned around. We might say he was converted to a new and vibrant faith.

The lame man outside the temple doesn't just leap and dance. He praises God. He recognises the power behind the prayer and responds by praising God. And if we read on a little in our Bibles we would see that the incident led Peter to proclaim the gospel message of salvation – the message of the life and death and resurrection of Jesus – and thousands responded by believing in him. Thousands of lives were turned around.

And the paralysed man story. We tend to focus on the fact that he was able to walk again. But before he tells him to get up, we see Jesus telling the man that his sins were forgiven. This wasn't just something physical. More was going on. The things that separated this man from God were being dealt with. A new and restored relationship between him and the almighty was now possible – and he began to praise God. His life, like that of Naaman and like that of the lame man was turned around.

So what were the miracles in these stories? Cleansing from leprosy, legs being made whole? Or lives being turned around. People turning to God and being given new purpose and new hope – new life if you like.

So back to our lives, our hurts and pains, our struggles and our prayers. How do these stories help us?

The first thing to stress is that to pray in these situations is a right response. Praying is about bringing ourselves into the presence of God. And this is surely right because God is concerned about us. Each one of us. Not just the successful, the healthy, the rich, the educated, the ones who have made it. But each one of us. Even you; even me.

In the stories we heard, Naaman is a foreigner (in a time when foreigners were looked on as enemies). The man outside the temple gate was a beggar. Maybe not homeless, but perhaps not far from it. Certainly not a respected member of society. The paralysed man we know little about. But he was clearly not able to do much for

himself. He was totally dependent on others. None of these people were seen as favoured or blessed.

And yet God showed his love and his concern for each one of these people. Its like we heard a couple of weeks ago when Jesus was saying about the birds of the air, and the flowers of the field. If God cares for them how much more will he care for each one of you.

So we should not feel that either we or our concerns are not worthy of bringing to God. He wants us to trust him with all our cares and worries, all our hurts and pains. To trust him with our very selves.

And the second thing is that although things may not change outwardly when we pray, they will change inwardly. We will be reassured of God's love and care. We will see how God wants to be alongside us in what we are going through, and we will respond by praising him in some way.

Of course it might be that there is a physical healing – it does happen. I know people in our congregations who can testify to it. I know myself that just occasionally people have been healed when I have prayed with them and for them. But this is rare.

What isn't rare is that when we pray, or when we are prayed for, we experience a new assurance of God with us. Of his protection and his comfort. Of his power and his strength to carry on.

We might call such a prayer not just a prayer for healing in the physical sense, but for wholeness. So pray for healing if it be God's will; but pray more for this wholeness – peace – Shalom is the Hebrew word - being able to cope with the situation because of the strength God give us. Pray for the presence, the reassuring and loving presence of God alongside us in our pain, his loving arms around us and supporting us. As we read in the OT – the eternal God is your refuge and underneath are the everlasting arms.

When I was a child, if I hurt myself, or someone at school hurt me by what they said or did, I used to go to my Mum. I knew she couldn't change the situation. My cut knee would still throb; the names I was called would still hurt, but I would know that she was there alongside me. Understanding my hurt, knowing my pain. And I would always feel better able to cope because of it.

Today when we pray for you we will pray for wholeness, for God's loving presence. This includes physical healing – if that's what you are asking for – but its more about a restored and right relationship with your loving God, who promises to be alongside you day by day. Whatever and without fail.