

Homily for people and parishes

Bishop Cam Venables – Sunday, 11th February 2024, Epiphany 6

Readings: **2Kings 5:1-14**

1Corinthians 9:24-27

Psalm 30

Mark 1:40-45

One of the things on my bucket list is to one day walk the Camino de Santiago which is an eight hundred kilometre trek from a small town in France to Santiago in northern Spain. As I've listened to the growing number of friends who have made this pilgrimage there seem to be some common experiences. These include life's rhythms slowing because people are walking rather than driving, and in that slower rhythm there is space to reflect on life and faith and become more aware of the journeys that have been travelled by other pilgrims. Even the goals of each day become short-term and local as people ask themselves where will I sleep tonight? How will I manage these blisters? And, how far will I have to walk tomorrow? Through the challenge of walking twenty-five km each day people have also said that they became more grateful for little things that were previously taken for granted: like a hot shower; a good night's rest; and occasionally... a glass of wine!

Over the last thirty six years the number of people walking the Camino de Santiago has grown from two thousand nine hundred and five pilgrims in 1987, to a staggering four hundred and forty six thousand pilgrims in 2023! Why would such a large number of people be willing to give up modern comforts and walk long distances each day?

There are many definitions of 'pilgrimage' but I think of it as a journey, often a long one, made to a sacred place with the expectation that along the way there will develop a deeper sense of self-understanding, relationship with God, and relationship with others. Perhaps, with this definition... even life itself could be understood as a pilgrimage?

In this week's Old Testament reading we hear about a powerful man who embarked on a pilgrimage. Naaman was the commander of the Aramean army. He was a great warrior and was much respected in his country, even though he had leprosy. This tells us that Naaman was not Jewish for if he had been, he would not have been allowed to be the commander of an army and would not have been respected. Instead, he would have been an outcast, would have been understood by his community to be cursed by God.

Naaman's wife had a Jewish slave who suggested that there was a Jewish prophet called Elisha who could heal her husband. Naaman heard this and, with the full support of the Aramean king, went on a pilgrimage to find Elisha and seek healing. First, he went to the king of Israel, and then to the home of the prophet but Elisha appears not to have been a courteous man because he did not go out to see Naaman or speak with him. He simply sent a message directing him to wash in the river Jordan seven times.

In response Naaman was affronted because he was a powerful man and was used to people giving him respect. He became angry and resolved to ignore Elisha's direction and return home to wash in a river of his own country. Happily for him, his servants had the courage to counsel him differently, and Naaman had the wisdom to listen to them. He, quite literally, got off his high horse, washed seven times in the Jordan, and was healed.

In his pilgrimage Naaman went with the hope of healing and greater wholeness – and he received this. However, he did not receive it in the way he expected. He did not receive it from the king of Israel, and he was not given respect by the prophet Elisha. There was no magic waving of hands – simply a direction from a person in tune with God – and when that direction was followed, healing became possible.

I wonder how open we are to recognising the activity and direction of God from unexpected people?

In today's reading from Mark's Gospel Jesus was accosted by a man with leprosy. This man was not a powerful army commander – the Gospel does not even mention his name. However, he was Jewish and because of his disease he would have been separated from his family and have been forced to live outside the walls of his town. He should not have come to Jesus, and I imagine people shrinking away from him... afraid of being contaminated.

However, he was on a pilgrimage – even a mission - with a clear focus, and part of that pilgrimage, or mission, involved risk. He could have been dragged outside and beaten; he could even have been stoned to death. However, he had an expectation that somehow through Jesus he would find healing, and through that healing his whole life would be transformed.

Time and again Jesus seemed to inspire hope among those his society had written off. Whether they were tax-collectors, sex-workers, or lepers, there was a consistent theme that when someone was rejected, looked down upon, or written off... Jesus brought healing, hope, and new life.

It would have been understandable for Jesus to have turned his back on the man with leprosy and reject his request. Perhaps he could have, like Elisha, not risked contamination but simply sent him to the nearest river to wash. However, Jesus did neither of these things. The Gospel writer tells us that Jesus was moved with compassion, reached out his hand, and touching the man saying, 'Be made clean.' Mark's Gospel affirms that immediately the man was healed and through this was able to live in the community that had previously rejected him.

In touching the leper Jesus chose to become ritually unclean according to the religious laws of his time – 'though we hear nothing about this consequence in the Gospel. What we do

hear about however is Jesus telling the man not to tell others what had happened. If you like, to simply get on with his life. It's not clear why Jesus said this and it's interesting to think about possibilities. Whatever the reasoning, the man ignored this request and told everyone who would listen... and, why wouldn't he?!

This Wednesday, February 14th, is Ash Wednesday! It marks the beginning of Lent – those six weeks before Easter Sunday in which we are each invited by the Church to go on pilgrimage. I do not mean that we have to get on a plane and go off to France or Spain for a long walk! I mean that we think of the next six weeks as a period of time in which we'll set aside some of the distractions and busyness of our living to recalibrate our lives so that Christ is more clearly our true north!

Last week I spoke about identifying a time and place in our homes where we can pray regularly, read the Bible, and potentially begin each time prayer by lighting a candle or making a cup of tea. We may sometimes come to that time and place like Naaman – and, need to get off our high horse after listening to the counsel of others. While on other days we may come to that time and place on our knees like the leper in today's Gospel – clear about our need for Christ, and our longing for great healing and wholeness.

Whoever we are, and wherever we are... the most important thing is to come.

Please join with me, as I close in prayer:

Holy God, we give thanks for each breath and heartbeat that makes our lives possible, and for your love. We give thanks that in prayer we meet with you and are strengthened by your Spirit. Renew within us a longing to meet you in prayer during the six weeks of our Lenten pilgrimage. Through your Spirit, help us be our best selves each day, and be a blessing to those we share life with. We pray in the name of the one who was moved with compassion, Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen