

Wash and Be Clean

II Kings 5:1-14; Galatians 6:1-6

I leave the country for five minutes, and come back to political meltdown! There can be no denying that the events of the last ten days, first the Brexit vote, and then the political melt-down in Westminster, have been the most serious challenge to the peace and stability of our nation since World War Two.

The country is divided, and the mirror we have held up to ourselves does not reveal a particularly flattering image. The negative campaigning on both sides; the apparent twisting of the truth; the lack of forward planning; the apparent lack of understanding about the financial implications of Brexit; the barely concealed racism in some Brexit campaigning; the backstabbing, head-in-the-sand denial of some politicians in most of our political parties; and that list could go on.

I watched the referendum results coming in from the United States, and felt bereaved. Recognising the UK vote was close, though not close in Scotland or here in Edinburgh, and recognising that there was a clear divide, I felt that something was being lost. Something else too – I felt unclean. I felt that our nation, for a variety of complex reasons, was unclean. What, in this tarnished time, will wash our nation, and the individuals within it, clean?

That's a powerful image. It's the image that we get in the story of Naaman. The Bible passage tells us he was a great man, a successful military general, and had the favour of his king. We're also told he had leprosy, almost certainly not the full medical condition, but more likely to be some serious skin complaint (the Bible is a bit loose with the use of the word). Here was a man who controlled everything in his sphere of influence, but he could not control his health. And he wanted to be clean.

A slave girl from Israel, the epitome of the ancient world's non-person, captured in a Syrian raid, unexpectedly brings good news to Naaman. There is a prophet in Samaria, Elisha, Elijah's successor, who has the power through God, to make Naaman clean. They communicate

through a servant, and Naaman is told by the prophet to go to the Jordan, and wash, and be clean. Naaman's pride gets in the way. Surely the prophet Elisha should have come to him in person? Surely the rivers of Syria are greater than the Jordan? Surely wealth and status merited special treatment, and healing?

But his servants prevail on him, I like to think the little Israelite maidservant amongst them, and give advice, just do what the prophet has asked. Humble yourself and do this little thing. Accept the word of the prophet, and the God Who is beyond the prophet, wash, and be clean. And he did. And he was.

In these times of dirty politics, clouded with anti-immigrant feeling, and self-interest, and xenophobia, what can the Church, the people of faith, say to our nation? I wonder if the nation would listen? What might the Church, the people of faith, show to our nation? They might watch, if we, modelling graciousness, humility, kindness, open-minds, a servant spirit, showed what it would be like to wash and be clean. To be set free from this oppressive spirit of fear and anger and guilt and despair that is engulfing us. If the nation won't listen, might they see how spiritually washed people, spiritually cleansed people, behave? If we, the Church, the people of faith, modelled or baptism, that symbolic washing and cleaning that we witnessed this morning, and showed the world what a difference that would make, and does make, that would be a gift of light in these dark and uncertain times.

At the Presbyterian Church in the USA's General Assembly last week, the image of baptism, of washing and being cleaned, was powerfully demonstrated. In Church we spend so much time concentrating on Communion, on the bread and wine, and there is certainly nothing wrong with that. But what if we were to focus our minds on baptism? On the symbol of water, and the washing and cleansing it represents? At the entrance to the venue of the PCUSA they had built a huge glass font, and at the opening of the Assembly, it was filled with water. As part of the opening service, we were called to turn our backs on the water, symbolising how we turn away from God's love, then we were called to turn around, and face the font, and hear the message

of God's mercy, that through the water, we are washed; through the water, we are cleansed. It was powerful, and emotional.

In his sermon, the outgoing Moderator challenged the Assembly do something more. He said, "Live wet." If you've been baptised, if you've had the symbol of water placed upon, the symbol of washing and cleansing, show it, live wet, that others might see, and be curious, and called, and experience it for themselves.

What if, as a Church, as a people of faith, we were to 'live wet'? What if, in these difficult days, we were to show to our nation what it means humble, yet still welcoming; humble, yet still open-minded; humble, yet still inclusive; humble, yet still serving; to be humble, yet still believing? There is a crying need, a **crying** need, for our nation to be shown the difference good people, of good faith, can make for good.

A little immigrant slave girl, trafficked away from her home, told her captors about a believer in God who might be able to heal a sick man. A believer in God called for a simple act of obedience and service, to go into a river seven times, so that the sick man might be washed and made clean. Faith, humility, service. Resulting in mercy, wholeness, and freedom.

Naaman was told to wash and be clean. He struggled, but he did it. And he was set free from the darkness that clouded his life.

Last week I heard another story of mercy and hope. I heard stories of what people need to learn and to be to make the most of their lives. I heard about three ideas.

Resilience – you need to be resilient to get on with life and to get through the difficult times.

Accept challenge – life is about facing up to the tough things and overcoming them and learn from them.

Growth – if your life isn't about growing, about developing, about transforming, then it isn't going to be much.

What insightful leader in the land had such a vision? David Cameron? Boris Johnson? Michael Gove? Theresa May? Jeremy Corbyn? Angela Eagle? No, it was none of these. It was no one person. It was about sixty twelve year olds from South Morningside Primary School, in this

Church last Tuesday for their end of term service. Sixty Primary Seven children – sharing what they had learned – and how they hoped to go on with their lives. Sixty of them, all faiths and none, not far from that font, telling about a vision of a world that lived wet that could be washed and cleaned.

Those twelve year olds knew it, and hoped to live it. Might it not be that we also, this Church, these people of faith, you, might know it and hope it and live it too?

Remember your baptism, that you have been touched by the water of mercy, and welcome, and hope. Live wet! And if you've not been baptised, there is water, there is time? Live lives that are washed and clean, and show this country, this world, that hope still lives, and light still shines, and love still embraces. We might not have the instant answer to our country's turmoil.

But by God, and through the water of baptism, we can show what it is like to be washed, what it is like to be clean, what it is like to be forgiven, what it is like to be free.

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

Amen