

Jan 2nd 2011: New Beginnings: Communion at the end of service:

Today is the first Sunday of a new year and on account of that we speak of it as a new beginning. But in fact for most people a new year simply brings a continuation of life as it was in the year just gone. It's up to the individual to decide whether they are prepared to make it a new beginning, by aiming to change things in their lives during the months that lie ahead.

That's of course why people make new year resolutions. Promises they make to themselves about changes they will aim for in the year that is to come.

Now for Christians this first Sunday in the new year allows us to do that in a Biblical and God led way. To look at one of the many stories of new beginnings that we find in the Bible, and gain from that some directions regarding change that we could adopt for ourselves in 2011. Changes that are honouring to God and will make this year a new beginning that will further the cause of Jesus through our lives.

So with that in mind I want you to listen this morning as I read to you the OT story of Naaman: 2 KINGS 5:1-19a.

Naaman was a very important man in the army of a nation that had a lot of control over the Nation of Israel. He was a Gentile and as Commander of the Syrian Army he had the power to make things very difficult for God's people. But Naaman was a leper. He was obviously in the early stages of the disease for he still held his position in the courts of the king, but he would have known that the time was fast approaching when he would be declared an outcast. Destined to spend his few remaining years separated from friends and families. Begging for bread as a homeless and rejected victim of this incurable and contagious disease.

It was that thought no doubt, along with the leading of Almighty God that led him to seek healing from Jehovah's prophet Elisha. An experience that caused him to endure the humiliation associated with seeking help from the enemy, and then forced him into an act of faith that he would have preferred to avoid; the plunging of himself seven times beneath the Jordan river. The amazing result was his total cleansing and a new beginning as a worshipper of Almighty God who was not just free of leprosy, but spiritually remade as a follower of Jehovah.

Now that is a truly wonderful and unique story, and because the Bible often equates the disease of leprosy with the burden of sin it could so easily be the story of someone here this morning.

For sin is all the rotten things we do that make us imperfect before a holy God and in the end it will cause every human being to be an outcast for ever from God's presence unless it is dealt with. But for sin to be dealt with a person has to come to that place when, like Naaman with his leprosy, they face up to the fact that they need help. They need the total healing from their sinful acts, past, present, and future, that only Jesus Christ can give.

Maybe that's where you are on this first Sunday of 2011. For a time you have been thinking about your position before God and you know that you need a Saviour. Well today you can ask Jesus into your life. He will cleanse and renew you. He will make today a whole new beginning for you. If God has led you to this place then don't allow your pride to stop you from taking the hand of Jesus. He knocks at the door of your heart but only you can let Him in.

This morning you can do that through the act of communion. Whether it is the first time you have ever partaken or the first time you have done so with real meaning, you can today take the elements as a visible sign to Jesus that you want Him in your life as your Saviour and Lord.

But for many of us that step is part of our history. We received Jesus as Saviour some time ago and we are now seeking to live each day for Him. If that is the case for you then this story of Naaman has 4 new beginnings that are applicable for most of us to think about emulating.

The first is that Naaman decided to make a change in the direction of his life. He reviewed where it was heading and he was far from happy about the future and decided to do something about it.

As Christians the beginning of the year is a good time for us to do that. To look at our future direction and ask the Lord whether there is a new direction He wants us to walk in. Perhaps you have been dissatisfied lately with your life and it may well be that God wants you to step out and do more with it for Him. He has a challenge He wants you to pursue or something that needs to change so that your spiritual health will become what He wants it to be.

The second is that Naaman decided to listen to others. I get the feeling from reading the story that Naaman may well have been a little arrogant as far as others were concerned. He was extremely important and high up in society and possibly did look down on those who he felt were lesser than him. But in the end Naaman had to change that in order to gain healing. He had to take the advice of a slave girl, be spoken to by an old Jewish prophet through a servant messenger, and follow instructions that he disagreed with. He even had to allow his set views be changed by the words of his servants.

Are you a good listener or is this an area where the Lord demands change in your life. Is there an arrogance about you. A stubborn belief that you are always right, that the Lord wants you to face up to. Do you need to resolve to listen better to others, even those you previously looked down upon, as you move into 2011.

Third, Naaman chose to be more humble. In a sense that was part of his decision to listen to others but it was more than that. He recognized that if he wanted help from God then he had to do what God wanted, however unpleasant that was. To go to the prophet of Israel for help in the first place and to overcome the anger he felt when he was treated in his view, as just another common peasant, was tough for him. But once he made the decision to be more humble he stuck with it.

If the Lord is showing you the need to be more humble towards others then don't expect it to be easy. It may mean receiving criticism or correction with a receptive heart rather than a sullen and reactive spirit. Or being prepared to follow when your mind is demanding that it is your right to lead. It will definitely involve being a servant and allowing others to receive the praise as you bow yourself under the mighty hand of God.

Fourth, Naaman chose to make worship of Jehovah part of his everyday life. It hadn't been up to that point so in many ways it was easier for him than it may be for you because he was starting from scratch. However, he knew when he made the decision to do so that it wasn't going to be easy.

When he understood the greatness of God and what God had done for him, he committed himself to following God and worshipping him whatever the cost.

In a practical way he got as much earth as two mules could pull and he carted that back to Syria. It was an obvious sign to all that asked that he would be worshipping a different God from now on, and the dirt from Israel upon which he would build his altar, would enable him to do that. He vowed to refrain from worshipping all the gods that those around him in Syria worshipped.

He also thought ahead to the problems that him being committed to faith in Jehovah would bring in his employment by the king, and asks forgiveness for the times when he would have to follow the leading of his master in the temple of the god Rimmon.

Naaman committed himself to being visible back in Syria amongst his peers, fellow soldiers, and even the king as a follower of Jehovah. He knew that his position would at times lead him into compromising situations, but even then he vowed to sacrifice to no god other than Jehovah and to declare that fact to others.

Is this something you need to think about as a Christian in 2011. To declare yourself for Christ in your family, social group, work place as you have never done before. To refrain from following the crowd when their worship is clearly of other gods that go against the Lordship Christ claims over your life. To be known unequivocally as a follower of Jesus.

Four suggested changes from the life of Naaman that we can think about today. New beginnings that we can put into operation for Jesus. And as we come to the communion table in a moment. As we move forward to take the bread and the cup, may that be a pledge on our part to do or to be something more for Jesus in 2011, and to ask Him to enable us to hold firm to our promises.