

These comments present one interpretation of today's readings; other interpretations may be possible. Comments are best read with the readings.

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2 Kings 5:1-14

NRSV

Neither the “king of Aram” (Syria) nor the “king of Israel” (v. 5) are named but they are likely Ben-hadad and Jehoram. If so, this event occurred about 850 BC. The story tells us that Israel's God has made Aram more powerful than Israel: first, note “the LORD had given victory to Aram” (v. 1). “Leprosy” translates a Hebrew word for a number of skin diseases, some curable and others not. Sufferers were quarantined, but only in advanced stages of the malady. The captive Israelite “young girl” (v. 2, called a *little maid* by one scholar – in contrast to the mighty Naaman) serves Naaman's wife. “Samaria” (v. 3) is the city (not the land) where Elisha lives. It was normal to bring gifts when approaching a prophet (v. 5). The “gold” weighs about 70 kg (150 lbs); it is of great value. The king of Israel tears his clothes (v. 7) in shock and dismay, unable to handle the situation: an enemy is seeking help! But Elisha is confident: he counsels that here is an opportunity for Naaman to learn about God through him (v. 8). Naaman does not deign to enter Elisha's house (v. 9), so Elisha does not come out to meet him: he “sent a messenger” (v. 10).

Naaman is commanded to wash completely (“seven times”) in the Jordan. V. 11 shows his misconception about how a prophet of God operates; he expects him to behave like a pagan prophet. Elisha's prescription is too simple for him, so he almost rejects it (v. 12). (The “Abana” and “Pharpar” rivers run near Damascus.) Naaman does accept advice *from below*, as he has listened to the advice of the “young girl”. In v. 15, he returns to Elisha and says “I know that there is no God in all the earth except in Israel”: he acknowledges God as the god of all. But contrary to the normal practice of the time, Elisha will accept nothing in payment for the cure, for it is God who heals (v. 16). Jesus' reference to this story almost brings his earthly ministry to a precipitous end (Luke 4:16-30).

Psalm 30

NRSV

The psalmist clearly praises God for his recovery from grave illness, but this psalm may also be allegorical: its title says that it was sung at the dedication of the Temple, which was desecrated in 164 BC and rededicated in 161 BC. “Sheol”, “the Pit”, (v. 3) was thought of as a place under the earth where the dead existed as mere shadows. In vv. 4-5, the psalmist invites all present to join in giving thanks. In vv. 6-10, he recounts what happened to him. He had felt perfectly secure and healthy (v. 6), but he fell from God's favour (God “hid”, v. 7, from him) – he became ill. Feeling near death, he prayed to God, pointing out that if allowed to go the Sheol, no one, not even God, could hear him. God did hear his prayer and restored him to health and favour (vv. 11-12): his sorrow was turned to joy, even to liturgical “dancing”. He will praise God for the rest of his life.

1 Corinthians 9:24-27

NRSV

Paul has written that he has been “entrusted with a commission” (v. 17) from God to spread the good news. He has gone beyond what God expects of him, making himself the servant of all, not burdening the Corinthians financially, so that he may bring more to Christ. He has accepted this discipline voluntarily, and “for the sake of the gospel” (v. 23).

Now he presents the metaphor of sports, one familiar to his first readers, for the Isthmian Games (of which the Olympics are a modern imitation) were once held in Corinth. He likens Christian life to track races – but every metaphor has its limitations. It seems that by being believers and joining in the liturgical and sacramental life of the Church some Christians at Corinth thought themselves sure of eternal life – but the Christian way requires more than this. While we all set out on the Way in our baptism, not all persevere as we should. In athletics, one person wins; in Christian life, not all persevere beyond baptism so Paul says “run in such a way that you may win it” (v. 24). Do this by exercising “self-control” (v. 25, self-discipline), whatever your way to Christ. (Paul thinks of other sports too: see v. 26). Winners in the Games received a crown of dried celery, a “perishable wreath” (v. 25), while Christians who strive towards the goal of being more Christ-like will, by God's grace, be given eternal life. Paul not only exerts great effort but does so purposefully and effectively: a boxer who *beats the air* loses (v. 26). Paul disciplines his “body” (v. 27) and harnesses it to God's purposes, lest he be “disqualified” from eternal life. Thus he warns his readers.

Mark 1:40-45

NRSV

At Capernaum Jesus has surprised those worshipping and studying in the synagogue by teaching with a new kind of authority and by healing a mentally disturbed man by command alone. He has then cured Peter's mother-in-law of a fever. Later people in a crowd have witnessed him curing many. After communing with God in “a deserted place” (v. 35) he moves on to spread the good news in other towns.

Now a leper approaches him in supplication (“kneeling”, v. 40). The man recognizes something of the essence of God: God chooses whom he heals (and saves). Jesus is “moved” (v. 41) emotionally: he touches the man – thus making himself ritually unclean and risking leprosy himself. Jesus' stern “warning” (v. 43) is to “say nothing to anyone” (v. 44), but the man ignores it (v. 45). Jesus does not wish to be misunderstood: physical healing is only an indicator of the Kingdom; he is not merely a wonder-worker. For the man to be readmitted to Jewish society, the healing needs to be confirmed by a “priest” (v. 44) – a requirement of Mosaic law (“what Moses commanded”). Leviticus 14 requires him to make certain sacrifices (“offer for your cleansing”) so he could be ritually purified. (The “testimony to them” may either be to the crowds or be to the power of God now available to all believers.) Lest he be misunderstood, Jesus continues his ministry secretly, “out in the country” (v. 45), away from the crowds.