

St Edmundsbury Cathedral



TRINITY 17
12 OCTOBER 2025
St Edmundsbury Cathedral
Sermon by The Venerable Vanessa Herrick

2 Kings 5:1-3; 7-15c; {2 Tim 2.8-15; Luke 17.11-19)

Every day we are bombarded by voices.

Voices on the radio; voices on podcasts; voices in our Inbox; voices on social media; voices on the TV; voices in our newspapers; voices of our friends; voices of our families; voices from within ourselves.

So who do *you* listen to? Who do *you* take notice of?

Naaman was a powerful warrior and used to getting his own way. And he was far more likely to give orders than to take advice. But in our Old Testament reading this morning, Naaman is confronted with a whole series of 'unlikely voices' who gently guide and lead him towards his healing. For Naaman's greatness is marred by just one thing: he suffers from leprosy.

Let's listen to what happens.....

Amongst the captives from one of his successful raids in the surrounding country is an Israeli girl, whom he takes as a slave for his wife. And *hers* is the first 'unlikely voice':

'If only my Lord were with the prophet who is in Samaria! He would cure him of his leprosy.' (v 3)

Naaman is desperate for, and so, perhaps surprisingly, he listens to this voice, and he sets out – using all his powers of diplomacy and fully displaying his wealth - to meet Elisha, the prophet of Samaria.

But then comes a second 'unlikely voice', for when Naaman and his retinue arrive at Elisha's house, the prophet doesn't greet him *himself*, but sends a messenger with this instruction: "Go wash in the Jordan seven times, and your flesh shall be restored and you shall be clean" (v 10)

The great leader Naaman is deeply affronted. His response to *this* unlikely voice is somewhat different to the first. 'Who does this prophet think I am?' we can imagine him saying, angrily. 'I've travelled all this way into a foreign land; I've brought silver, gold and fine clothes, and all he can do is send me a messenger with some ridiculous instruction about washing in a filthy Israeli river. He hasn't even got the decency and politeness to come out and greet me properly!' The proud warrior is outraged.

And then comes a third 'unlikely voice'.

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It is, of course, that of Naaman's own servants, who gently challenge their master to face his sense of superiority and his pride and to follow Elisha's simple instructions:

'Father, if the prophet had commanded you to do something difficult, would you not have done it? How much more, when all he said to you was, Wash, and be clean?' (v 13)

Here is a call for simplicity rather than complexity. And Naaman swallows his pride, obeys the instructions and is healed of his disease.

It may not have happened quite in the way he'd expected; he may not have been greeted and treated with the honour he'd become accustomed to; but he listened to the unlikely voices and despite his somewhat reluctant obedience, God brought him the healing he sought.

One story.
Three apparently insignificant characters.
Three unlikely voices.

- an Israeli slave-girl
- a prophet's messenger
- Naaman's own servants

And through each of them God speaks.

In a world full of a multitude of deafening and often contradictory voices, who, we might ask, are the unlikely voices of our own day, and are we prepared to listen to them? Are we willing to believe that God may want to speak to us in ways and through people we least expect?

Or, like Naaman, are we too proud to listen? Too hesitant to act? Too often looking for complicated solutions? And are we willing not only to listen but to be and to become the 'unlikely voices' of our own day – to challenge the powerful, to affront the proud, in our conversations, and through our simple actions and encounters with others?

We can respond to that question in several ways.

Firstly, as a society.
Who is it that we listen to?

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Are we prepared to listen to the wisdom of the simple, the voices of the poor, the ‘underdog’, the children? Or are the only voices we acknowledge the ones who speak through the media, or in government, business, the global financial markets, or the academic institutions of our world? Do we even hear the possibilities suggested by the ‘slaves’ of the twenty-first century - the homeless, the poor, the asylum seekers, the addicts, the refugees, the young - and will we recognise that, sometimes, their experience and knowledge and wisdom may be of more value than our own? Perhaps we’re often so pre-occupied with telling such people what *they* need, that we fail to listen to them telling us what we need...

Over the years, Greta Thunberg has been one such ‘unlikely voice’ who has had a phenomenal effect on global attitudes and interest, not only on issues of climate change but also on wider matters of global justice. Hers (and others’) willingness recently to risk her lives for the purpose of bringing food aid to the starving of Gaza is but one example of her courage in challenging the ‘powerful warriors’ of our own day.

Secondly, who are the unlikely voices we should be listening to within the Church? In recent months and years, through the painful and sometimes shocking hearings of the Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse, the Church has been reminded again of the importance of listening to the stories of victims of abuse and seeking their wisdom in knowing how to change the Church’s systems and procedures so that they become more effective in the future than they have been in the past.

Or, how good are we at listening to the simple voices of children, or to the wisdom of the elderly in our Church communities – those who may no longer be at the height of their physical powers and yet who have so much to give us out of their experience and insight? How much do we allow God to speak to us through those who are *not* necessarily the influential members of our churches and cathedrals, who are *not* necessarily on Chapters or committees or PCCs or synods, but who may, indeed, be the messengers of God’s grace and guidance for a Church that, like Naaman, is sometimes in danger of becoming so self-focused that it no longer knows how to seek its own cleansing and healing.

But there’s a third way too: “Who are you listening to at the personal level?” We all have people we trust and whose wisdom we seek – and that’s good and proper. But perhaps in the week ahead, we might make a conscious effort to identify and to listen to the unlikely voices in our own lives - our children and grandchildren, the person who comes to clean our house or tend our garden, the milkman, the delivery driver, the shopkeeper, whoever it may be - and we shouldn’t be too proud to act on their advice.

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I'm reminded of that scene in the 1997 film *Mrs Brown* where Queen Victoria, still in inconsolable grief for her beloved Albert, is confronted by her gillie (played inimitably by Billy Connolly), with the words: '*I never thought to see you like this, woman!*'. His challenge – though abrupt - was a turning point, as she listened - not to the advice of her doctors and politicians - but to the unlikely voice of her courageous servant, Mr Brown....

And when we're forced to listen to the unlikely voices, how do we respond? Are we affronted? annoyed? put down? Do we think we know better, that the way ahead has to be more complex and demanding than we're being told? Or will we listen to those who encourage us to swallow our pride and take the simpler path?

God's way of working and speaking has often been through the most unlikely of people - Moses the murderer; Joseph the dreamer; the boy, Samuel; David the shepherd. Each of these and many more who followed them, became the 'unlikely voices' in his plan of salvation for his people Israel. And it's a pattern he continued in choosing a virgin and a carpenter to be the earthly guardians of the unlikely voice through which he spoke his most eloquent 'word' to humanity. Jesus Christ – the Living Word.

An Israeli slave-girl. A prophet's messenger. Naaman's own servants.

Unlikely voices, whose courageous willingness to speak out brought healing and hope to a proud and mighty warrior – a warrior whose willingness to listen, to consider and to act brought him the one thing he most desired.

Every day, in our world, we are bombarded by voices – many of them loud and powerful voices. They dominate our news and – even from distant shores – seem sometimes to dominate our lives. But the story of Naaman shows us this is not God's way.

So may God help us this week to *listen to* the unlikely voices of our own day and, perhaps, by his grace also *become* that unlikely voice for others; and so find ourselves cleansed, healed and equipped to bring healing to our world.

To him be the glory, now and in all eternity. Amen.