



Sermon: - 3rd July 2016

Letting go!

You already know that one of my hobbies is painting. Another of my hobbies is walking – hill walking. David and I used to spend a number of days off, and holidays, tramping the hillsides of Scotland. It can be a bit of a slog, but the feeling of achievement when you stand on the top of a mountain and can see for miles is exhilarating. Well, it is if you can see for miles, as too often in Scotland the most you can see is a few yards!

On one such occasion David and I decided to climb Ben Vorlich, the one by the Loch Lomond side. We had attempted it once or twice in the past and had been turned back by weather so, as the day was clear if a bit dull, we were hopeful of getting to the top.

David suggested that we should scale the hill from the side facing away from the loch, from the reservoir side, rather than the usual route from the lochside. As we climbed the hillside became more steep and rocky. The stones and boulders became larger and I resorted to pulling myself up the hill by my hands as well as my scrambling feet. Our path became more difficult and demanding until I could no longer see beyond the next boulder. I became ever more aware, both of the distance still to travel, although I could no longer see the summit over the boulders, and of the steep fall behind me down the hillside we had just climbed.

And then there came a point when the boulders massed about me, their shoulders seemingly hunched against me, preventing me moving forward, seemingly impenetrable. Ahead there was no route that I could see, only towering rock and crowding boulders. I looked behind and saw the steep climb I had made. The reservoir in the valley below seemed very far away, yet I felt that I could almost step off the hillside into it. I felt that if I moved, if I took one step, I would fall into it.

In panic, my feet stapled themselves to the rock; my hands fastened to the stone. I knew without doubt that to move was to fall, and that to fall was to die; yet not to move was also to die. I clung to the mountain, overwhelmed by vertigo, unable to move up or move down, but convinced that the only safe thing to do was to cling to the mountainside.

That, for me, is a parable. Sometimes in life we feel that hanging on to something familiar is the only way to be safe. We don't like stepping out into new territory; we don't want to give up the known, because sometimes that feels like the only security. But sometimes the known and familiar is in fact the enemy of well-being. Sometimes the things we hang onto prevent the good happening; sometimes they prevent God working in our lives. Sometimes letting go, as it seemed for me, stuck on the hillside, seems impossible, but I believe that our passages today show us that there is a better way.

At the heart of the story we read from the Old Testament is this issue of letting go. Naaman's Israelite slave girl suggested that he go to the prophet Elisha to be cured of his skin disease. This seemed to Naaman to be a good idea and so he went. Elisha told Naaman to wash himself seven times in the Jordan. Naaman would have been a social outcast because of his skin disease, and he was told that this simple ritual would cure him. But in spite of that he was almost too proud and too prejudiced to do what he was asked.

He was annoyed by the fact that Elisha hadn't even come out to see him. He wanted Elisha to "wave his hand over the place". To do a kind of magic trick. He was too proud to go swimming in a river. It was too simple - it was beneath his dignity. As his servant rightly pointed out, if the prophet had asked him to do something difficult he would have done it. And he was prejudiced; "we have much finer rivers in Syria!" he said. His pride and his prejudice very nearly prevented his healing. He had to let go of both of them, and humble himself, before God could work in his life.

Naaman is not the only person we read about today who found that letting go can allow God to work in new and exciting ways. In the story from Mark's gospel, we see Jesus letting go of the rules and regulations of the Jewish faith, he let go of the Jewish law of cleanliness to touch this unclean man. We all know of the caricature leper, waving his bell and shouting "Unclean, unclean!" Any contact with a leper made a person unclean. And according to Jewish law, being unclean meant having to go through costly and time-consuming rituals and sacrifices to become clean again. Like Elisha, Jesus could have healed from a distance, we know that from other stories in the gospels - but he didn't. Instead Jesus' touched the leper, and this touch says, "you are loveable, touchable, healable". Jesus let go of the letter of the law - which said the man was untouchable, and in letting go - let God work.

And of course the supreme example of letting go which we see in the bible is Jesus' incarnation. He let go of all the glories of heaven to live in poverty and to die in agony, so that we might be brought back into a relationship with God.

Naaman was tempted to hang onto his pride and his prejudice. We know that Jesus was tempted in the wilderness to hang onto his status - a status that would have prevented him touching the untouchable. So what about us? - What are we tempted to hang onto that prevents God working in and through us? Worldly wealth? A comfortable lifestyle, maybe? Anger, resentment, bitterness, unforgiveness possibly? Or perhaps it is a certain course of action we know to be wrong, or a relationship which is not good for us. There are many possibilities.

And I think this also has relevance for us in the current political situation in the UK. At the moment we are faced with so many uncertainties after the vote to leave the EU. The campaign itself has left us reeling, with both sides peddling misinformation and lies. Our leaders are our leaders no longer. The world looks on in astonishment as Britain tears itself apart. So what now for the rest of us? What does the future hold? Will there be employment, or unemployment? Will there be more money for social services, or less money. Will pensions be preserved, or lost? How will this affect our children, our grandchildren? We don't know. But this is the situation we are in, and regardless of how we voted in the referendum we cannot afford to get stuck in our feelings, whether they are joy and celebration, or fear and disappointment. We have to move forward into this unknown future and support one another, rather than deride one another. I believe we have to take the risk of being outward looking in care for others rather than selfish and self-serving. It is frightening that there has been an increase in racist attacks since the referendum. It is saddening that foreign nationals living in the UK say they no longer feel welcome. Is this the Britain we want to live in, to pass on to our children?

Whether we are speaking personally, or nationally, we too have our pride, and our prejudices. But we can't afford to be stuck there. Rather, can we find the faith and the courage, like Naaman, to let go of those negative feeling which prevent God from working in our lives? Sometimes letting God work involves taking a risk. Naaman risked making a

fool of himself in doing what the prophet said; what if he was not healed - he would be a laughing stock. But he let go of his pride and prejudice, bathed in the murky waters of the Jordan and was healed. The risk of trusting God is worth taking. Naaman discovered that. The leper in Mark discovered that.

There is a story told of a man walking along a cliff top in thick mist. The man slips and falls off the cliff. As he tumbles down to what he's sure is certain death he manages to clutch hold of a sapling growing out of the cliff side. He clings on to it for dear life and while he is hanging there he shouts out, "is there anybody there?" A voice comes out of the mist, "I'm here my son, let go and all will be well". The man thinks for a moment, then he says, "Is there anybody else there?" The man is reluctant to rely on the voice from heaven and so he clings desperately to the sapling. Eventually he grows tired and he drops to the ground, four feet below him.

Sometimes taking a risk is not nearly as risky as we think. Sometimes we need to let go in order to move on. I discovered that, stuck to the mountainside. With patience and understanding David talked me out of my fear and down the mountain.

We may yearn for healing and wholeness, for unity in our nation, but how ready are we to pay the price? Are we ready to do what Jesus asks, despite its difficulty or, as Naaman found, its ease? In the knowledge that he will be with us in it, holding our hand, talking us through it. Or are we more inclined to want to keep control of things - like Naaman, tempted to say - Lord make me whole, but I'll set the agenda!

The two stories we have read today are full of yearning, the longing for health and well-being. They are full of suffering, the pain of social ostracism, hurt, loneliness, and desperation. There are many in our nation today who feel that. There may be people here this morning who feel that.

We have seen that Naaman took a risk, and regained his health. We know that for our sakes Jesus took a risk and through him we are made whole, welcomed into the waiting arms of the father, redeemed and restored. In our lives, can we take a risk? For the sake of our nation are we willing to let go of the past? For the sake of our spiritual growth and health are we prepared to let go of our hurts and angers? Will our faith allow us to take risks? Can we let go of pride, of prejudice, of bitterness, of resentment, of whatever it is that gets between us and God. It's scary, I know, because we need to let go of the familiar, but even the familiar might not be safe, so can we take that risk, for ourselves, for our Church, for our nation, that in letting go, we might let God work.

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