

November 23, 2003
St. Clement of Rome

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

Naaman's is the most interesting story of a Gentile who came to the faith and worship of Israel's God. A general in the service of King Ben-hadad II of Syria during the ninth century before Christ, he was persuaded by a little Israelite girl, a captive of the Syrians, to make a pilgrimage to Israel in hopes of being cleansed of his leprosy. Fortunately for Naaman, the prophet Elisha was in residence at the time, for whom the curing of leprosy was a small part of a day's work.

We know on the authority of Jesus Himself that Naaman's story signified God's plans for the salvation of the Gentiles (Luke 4:27; 2 Kings 5:15-17). That is to say, what happened to Naaman prefigured the Christian mission to the nations. An especially ironical feature his story is that this Gentile confessed the true God during a time when many in Israel were engaged in the worship of false gods. He obeyed the Lord's prophet when not a few of that prophet's co-religionists were refusing to do so.

And just what did Elisha oblige Naaman to do? "Go," he told him, "wash in the Jordan seven times" (5:10. This order seems simple enough, but Naaman evidently expected something a bit more sudden and dramatic: "I said to myself, 'He will surely come out to me, and call upon the name of the Lord his God, and wave his hand over the place, and heal the leprosy'" (5:11).

Naaman, you see, though a religious man, did not yet know about sacraments, and the action required of him by Elisha—dipping into the Jordan seven times—had a distinctly sacramental quality. It was not "only a symbol," but a symbolic action specifically designated by God for the granting of grace. It actually accomplished something.

By bathing in the Jordan, Naaman would be doing a thing of great moment. He would be identifying with the Israelites who went through that river as their passage into the Promised Land. A whole generation of them had been baptized, as it were, in the Jordan, as the previous generation had been

baptized in the Red Sea (1 Corinthians 10:2). Just as those ancient events had foreshadowed the Christian sacrament of Baptism (10:11), Naaman's mystic sevenfold immersion in that same mystic river was to serve as a prophecy of the future baptizing of the nations.

What was required of Naaman was the "obedience of faith" (Romans 1:5; 16:26). Unless he did what he was told, he would remain a leper. John Chrysostom thus compared Naaman to the blind man whom Jesus commanded to wash his eyes in the pool of Siloam; both were required to make the same act of obedience in faith (*Homilies on John* 56). Naaman received from Elisha essentially the same command that the newly converted Paul would someday receive from Ananias, "Arise and be baptized, and wash away your sins, calling on the name of the Lord" (Acts 22:16).

Naaman did not understand any of this. What, after all, was so special about the Jordan River? "Are not the Abanah and the Pharpar, the rivers of Damascus, better than all the waters of Israel?" Naaman was not yet converted. He still resisted doing something he did not understand. "So he turned and went away in a rage" (2 Kings 5:12).

Naaman's loyal friends, however, eventually persuaded him to obey the prophet, "so he went down and dipped seven times in the Jordan, according to the saying of the man of God; and his flesh was restored like the flesh of a little child, and he was clean" (5:14). By way of prophetic prefiguration, Naaman submitted to the stern exhortation of the apostle Peter, "Repent, and let every one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins" (Acts 2:38). He went, he washed, he was cleansed.

It is in such terms that the Church of Jesus Christ has ever read the story of Naaman. That little girl who sent Naaman to be baptized, said Ambrose of Milan, "bore the mien of the Church and represented her image" - **speciem habebat Ecclesiae et figuram representabat** (**De Sacramentis** 2.8). "It was not for nothing," wrote Irenaeus of Lyons, "but for our instruction, that Naaman of old, suffering from leprosy, was cleansed by being baptized (**on baptistheis ekathaireto**). For as we are lepers by sin, we are made clean from our old transgressions through (**dia**) the sacred water and the invoking of the Lord, being spiritually regenerated as newborn

children, even as the Lord declared, 'Unless a man be born again through water and the Spirit, he shall not enter into the Kingdom of God' " (Fragment 34).

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