

FOURTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST – 7 JULY 2019

Each year, Roy Morgan Research polls Australians on who they believe are the most trustworthy people in our communities. It is no surprise that over the last few decades, nurses have topped the poll every year, usually gaining a 90 – 95% approval rating. Other medical professionals such as Pharmacists and doctors usually come second and third, with approval in the high 80%, and schoolteachers come next with around 80% approval. Police also rate highly at 75%, as do dentists, judges and University lecturers.

Unfortunately for me, clergy are only trusted by 34% of Australians in the most recent poll, 1% behind lawyers, but still double the trust we Australians have in politicians, who only have a 16% trust rating. Still, it's not all bad for the polities, as they still rate higher than Talk-back radio announcers, stockbrokers, insurance brokers, real estate agents, people in advertising and last, and certainly least, used car salesmen.

Both our Old Testament and Gospel readings for today look at the question, "Who do you trust?"

Our Old Testament reading for today from the second book of Kings tells the story of Naaman. Naaman, we are informed, was 'a great man', a man who could be trusted and revered. He was commander of the army of the King of Aram, which is what we would today call Syria. So great was Naaman, in fact, that Israel's God had given victory to the army of Aram, Israel's enemy! Yet, despite being a great man, Naaman was afflicted with leprosy. Diseases described in the Bible as 'leprosy' were not what we would call leprosy today, but referred to all sorts of skin conditions, including hives, eczema and the like.

A solution to Naaman's problem comes from an unlikely source, a young Hebrew slave-girl. She is unlikely, because as great as Naaman is, the slave-girl is as lowly. But she has connections. She knows the prophet Elisha.

Naaman asks the king for leave to go to the land of Israel to seek a cure and the king of Aram allows him to go with letters of recommendation and a great amount of treasure. But Naaman goes to the wrong person. He goes to the king of Israel. The king of Israel thinks this is a set-up, that the King of Aram is trying to pick a fight in order to find an excuse to invade Israel.

Word however reaches the prophet Elisha, who offers to help the king, and Naaman. So, the great Naaman, with his impressive entourage, comes to Elisha's house, only to be told by a messenger, "Go, wash in the Jordan seven times, and your flesh shall be restored, and you shall be clean." Elisha doesn't even bother to meet him personally, he just sends a messenger, who tells him to wash himself in a muddy little river. No wonder Naaman becomes enraged. He could have done that at home in far more impressive rivers than the Jordan! And so, he has a tantrum and starts to head home.

But once again, lowly servants come to the great Naaman's rescue. They point out something obvious: Elisha has asked him to do something easy, why not just try it? The problem for Naaman is that he falls into an all too human trap. And the trap is that doing something easy isn't always how we like to approach problems in our lives. As humans, we often think that complex problems and even easy problems, require complex solutions. Easy solutions sometimes sound too straightforward! Surely an easy solution won't work!

Although we are not told why, Naaman agrees to follow Elisha's advice, probably has to humiliate himself by taking off his armour and clothes and then immerses himself not once, not twice, but seven times in the muddy puddle. But, of course, it works. The easiest solution turns out to be just that, an easy solution!

All Naaman needed to do was to figuratively and literally get down off his high horse, and trust. But like so many of us, trusting in something simple and straightforward is often the most difficult thing to do.

Then, in our gospel reading for today we have the story of Jesus' sending out of the seventy, or seventy-two depending upon which ancient manuscript you read.

The number 70 that Luke uses, could refer to the 70 different nations listed in Genesis 10, who were the descendants of Noah. The apostles thus represent all the nations of the world. Also, Moses gathered 70 elders who were given a share of Moses' spirit so that they might bear the burden of the people.

Jesus sends these 70 disciples out as labourers into the harvest and as lambs into the midst of wolves, which is interesting, because he then tells them to take nothing with them for the journey! They are to totally trust that God will provide them with everything they need for their mission.

Jesus then instructs them to remain in the one place, accepting the hospitality of that place until their job is done. But if they are not welcomed, they are not to waste their time with that town. Kicking the dust off your feet was a sign of contempt for the people who it was directed against.

I find these verses interesting in terms of the church's ministry. For instance, if a community does not accept the ministry of their priest or pastor, should he or she continue trying to minister to that congregation or community, or should they just move on. And if a church in a community no longer has enough of a congregation to sustain the church building and its ministry, should it continue on until everyone has gone, or should it close up, sell up, and put those resources into new places of mission and ministry. These are difficult questions, but the mission of the seventy would suggest that sometimes the church needs to move on to new places and people.

The gospel ends with the apostles returning with joy, telling Jesus of all that has been accomplished. And Jesus says in response, "do not rejoice at this, that the spirits submit to you, but rejoice that your names are written in heaven." In other words, the spirits' subjugation to the disciples comes about because of their trust in the God who is in heaven, and that when we walk the path of trust in God, evil trembles, Satan falls and God's kingdom comes.

It can be hard at times to trust that God has everything in order. We are tempted to believe that we need to give God a hand, to use our own intelligence, our abilities and our hard work to bring God's kingdom to earth, whereas the truth is that we need God for everything. This doesn't mean that we don't have work to do, but it does mean that we need to be more trusting of God's purposes for ourselves, for the Church and for the world. And perhaps if we trusted God more, we too, like Naaman and the seventy apostles, could rejoice even more in all that God provides.