

We have an insight here into the meaning of faith as action. Elisha does not say to Naaman 'believe in Yahweh the God of Israel and you will be cured' but go and bathe seven times in the river Jordan. Naaman is upset thinking that he could just as well have washed himself clean in a river at home which undoes the faith he had by listening to the Israelite servant girl who had sent him on this quest from Aramea in the first place but his faith is restored because he now listens to his own servants who persuade him to do as requested

*'father, if the prophet had asked you to do something difficult, would you not have done it? All the more reason then, when he says to you, 'bathe, and you will become clean' (2Kg 5:13)*

So faith is proved true, or made true in action and not least because the step of faith, which is faith in action, demands an openness to the possibility that another is in control. It's always in this sense a test of humility or, one might say, an openness to a greater truth, to a truth that transcends one's own. It doesn't make sense to me but I'll do it. Naaman bathes and his skin disease disappears as does also his doubt – by acting in faith, faith comes to him, he discovers that the God of Israel is indeed the one true God and can't thank Elisha enough for this discovery. Elisha rightly refuses payment for no one can pay God for being God and in a delicious exposition of human ambivalence Naaman takes home soil from Israel to establish a place of true worship there in the midst of the many other gods the Arameans worship, apologising to Elisha that it would be politic for him to continue to do this also – one step at a time one might say.

When we come to the gospel story we see a very similar dynamic in action: but this time in a reversal of the Naaman story, it is Jesus, it is God, who turns his back on the Jordan and goes to those on the margins and orders them not to bathe but to go to their priests. But again their faith is proved, or made true in action – whether these priests are Jews or Samaritans. They go as they are unclean and find themselves in the going made clean. Only one, like Naaman, realises the true nature of what has happened, the true nature that is of Christ and comes back to thank him. His faith has saved him, that is his taking a step on a path he does not know, that doesn't initially make sense to him. He trusts himself to a stranger and finds faith. This is what I would like to suggest Br Herbert was asking of God when he asked me to close the door on him as he lay in bed preparing to take that last step of faith into the unknown, into the control of another, a step we all have to make, only to discover that we've been accompanied all along.

Br John Mayhead

Monastery of Christ Our Saviour