

BRUTON PARISH CHURCH
SIXTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

I used to like watching commercials on television when I was a boy. They were cheerful: "See the USA in your Chevrolet", for instance. They were about going to nice, friendly, sunny places by PanAm, though we as a family flew BOAC to Britain to enjoy the endless rain. The ads Madison Avenue used to churn out were upbeat, positive; even the ones for headache remedies such as AlkaSelzer (Plop, plop, fizz, fizz: unforgettable). Ads had catchy little jingles. The ones for crunchy peanut butter were so enthusiastic you'd think they were advertising the second coming of our Lord. No wonder we were such cheerful consumers back in the day.

Now, and I admit to sounding like an old fogey in saying this, advertisements seem mostly to whine on about pills and potions and laxatives. They are heavy with fear and full of dire warnings. "Isn't it time you had the beri beri conversation with your doctor? Don't take Ichneumonidae if you suffer from flat feet or have ever been run over by a tractor or are about to be."

I find these sales pitches for medicines boring at best and irritating at worst. I consult doctors, doing so as seldom as possible, to get *them* to do the diagnosis and suggest treatment: that's why they are paid so extravagantly. It's not up to me, even as an educated layman, to propose treatment regimens. To do so would put me in the same category as Naaman, the angry patient in the reading from the Second Book of Kings; one of my favourite stories from the Old Testament.

Naaman has a form of leprosy, poor chap. Naaman is also the commanding officer of the army of the King of Aram, as you just heard. Tired of trying every prescription or over-the-counter medicine at the Syrian equivalent of CVS, in

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desperation, he is told to consult a leading specialist, Elisha. It's time to have the leprosy conversation.

There are no worries about Health Insurance: the King of Aram sends a generous contribution to the King of Israel so his Supreme Commander will get world-class treatment. Ten talents of silver, six thousand shekels of gold and, because the King of Israel was clearly a *fashionist*, ten designer-label haute couture garments. I imagine you just use a credit card to cover your health costs. I do. So much less colourful.

The King of Israel, a strange man, goes off in a pique, tearing the Ralph Lauren labels off his clothes; most odd, even for Royalty. Even for King George the Third. There. That was your only reference to this being the Fourth of July. Make the best of it.

But eventually Naaman shows up at Elisha's house waiting, still waiting, to have the leprosy conversation.

What disappointed Naaman the most? That the famous consultant did not deign to see him personally but sent out an underling, a mere Houseman or Registrar? That he was prescribed no prescription, no potion, not even OTC? Just go and dunk yourself in the River Jordan (seven times) and drip dry. No warnings about "possible side effects include..." No, none of that. The treatment is too easy, too low-tech, too low-key, and Naaman, who expected at least antibiotics, completely lost his temper. Nothing worse than a patient who is sick and because he has watched commercials, knows better than the doctors how he should be treated. But eventually, you'll note, Naaman did follow Doctor Elisha's orders and, we are told, "his flesh was restored like the flesh of a young boy, and he was clean."

Does this remind you of thousands of hours of other commercials insisting that if you rub these potions on your

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eyes, ears, nose and throat, you too will have flesh like the flesh of a young boy, which in my case was filthy (the back of most young boys' necks is unspeakable) and covered with scratches, bruises and band aids; hard to see that being desirable. Can't see Naomi Campbell spending vast sums to achieve that.

The reason I like this story so much has nothing to do with the organic free-range treatment Elisha offers.

I like it because the Gospel is like that. Simple, generous, effective, free. The washing in the River Jordan is like baptism. God's good grace does all the rest.

No suggestion that because Naaman wasn't a member of the church he was untreatable. He was a foreigner, serving in the military of a foreign power: he wasn't even an Israelite. No-one said he had to convert first before he could be healed. Now why would God, working through the prophet Elisha, heal Naaman, of all people? Does God have no standards? No boundaries? No limitations? Isn't God like us? Isn't grace supposed to be demanding, difficult? For members only?

No, grace is not difficult, it's amazing, as the lovely old hymn reminds us.

And that brings us to the Gospel. Jesus sends out seventy disciples, out onto the road. No credit card, no debit card, no wallet or handbag, no Jimmy Choo shoes. They are not promised a big salary, nor do they work on commission.

Jesus merely instructs his representatives to go forth in the Lord's name and be cheerful: the best advertising slogan Jesus could come up with is "Peace to this house!" Not even, "Ding-dong: Avon calling." But then, the disciples aren't trying to sell anything, not even salvation, not even membership in Bruton Parish Church. Grace and peace are

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free to anyone who will accept them. Healing too: "Cure the sick who are in that place, and say to them, "The kingdom of God has come near to you."

And the same message was said to those who utterly rejected them and slammed the door in their face as if they were selling encyclopaedias or Fuller Brushes.

And, you know, it worked. It worked then. It still works today! There is no NEW AND IMPROVED GOSPEL.

Like those old 1950s era commercials, so simple, so unsophisticated, so positive, the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ takes you away from the world of weary tremulous anxieties about wrinkles and irregularity.

"Yet know this," says Jesus, "the kingdom of God has come near."

That's a timeless, eternally cheerful, message and apparently good for what really ails you too. The Gospel, this gift of God in Christ to everyone, is what attracts people to Christianity! What more could anyone ever want or need? Thanks be to God!!!

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