

In the cheaper part of a toy shop you can sometimes buy plastic puzzles which are a four by four square with 15 letters or numbers which have to be rearranged in order using the gap to shuffle the square pieces around. You can also play the same game with people, with a square marked out on the ground. Many years ago, when I was training for ministry, we did a little experiment on power and communication using this game. We tried it once with a leader, who dictates who should move where, and no-one was allowed to argue with him. We took a very long time to solve the puzzle, but we managed eventually. Then we tried it in a totally democratic way, with everyone giving their point of view. We completely failed to solve the puzzle and one person sulked for at least 30 minutes afterwards, believing that if only we had tried what he suggested it would have been OK. Finally we tried it in silence. Absolutely fascinating; the most unlikely person in the group became the initiator, and the puzzle was solved incredibly quickly. She had faith in her ability to solve it, but it was only when the power of the more vocal members was taken away that this became apparent.

Power, authority, leadership skill and faith do not always go hand in hand. This struck me very forcibly when I read again the story of Namaan.

Namaan was a general of the king of Damascus, in Aram, Syria. Aram and Israel had a long association. They traded together, the borders were open. Aramaic, the language of Aram, was widely spoken in Israel. It remained so for many years. This was the language that Jesus would have used. But the relationship between the two kingdoms was not always easy. We know from this story that there were raids by slave traders. A young girl, we don't even know her name, was taken from her home, perhaps with her family, perhaps sold by her family (such things happen when there is poverty), we have no way of knowing. What the story tells us is that she ended up in a neighbouring country serving Naaman's wife.

Namaan was well respected, and would have been well rewarded for his valour, so the family would have had many comforts. But we meet them when his family are in despair. Namaan has contracted leprosy. His career will be over. No more audiences with the king, no more campaigns, no more rewards.

This young girl, a slave, speaks up. She has compassion on her master. She believes that he could be cured of this terrible disease if he met with the prophet from Samaria, a city in Northern Israel. Here is a girl with no power, no authority, and yet in the vacuum created by this disease, where no doctor can cure Namaan, she has faith in her knowledge of God. Despite being in a foreign land, she has not

abandoned her faith in God. She has kept it alive, perhaps through prayer or ritual. And in this moment, she has the courage to speak, and that courage, that spark of faith, changed the whole situation for Namaan.

Namaan of course, as a general in the army, could not just wander into Israel. He needed a letter of introduction, to show that he came in peace. So the king was asked to write to the King of Israel. Suddenly everything becomes very complicated again. The king takes offence, thinking that he is being set up for failure. He knows that he is being asked to do something that is beyond his power. It is just as well there was no email in those days. Imagine the sort of reply he might have dashed off in anger. Thankfully, things happened more slowly then and Elisha came to hear of this request and he managed to persuade the king to let Namaan come to visit him.

Namaan sets off with his entourage. He is desperate. He is in that state where he is prepared to try anything. He arrives at the house of Elisha. He's not sure what to expect, but pretty certain that it will be quite dramatic. In fact Elisha doesn't even come out to greet him. That's quite a big snub. He just sends out messengers telling him to bathe in the river seven times.

Poor Namaan. He feels completely humiliated. He has travelled miles. He's tired, he's ill, and now he's angry, and hugely disappointed. He turns to go. He doesn't even want to wait to let the animals rest.

Unnamed servants, people of no account, persuade Namaan to try the treatment.

He does.

And then and only then will Elisha meet with him. Namaan now believes in the God of Elisha, the God of Israel.

This is a story about power and faith.

The King of Aram used his power to enable Namaan to go to Israel.

The King of Israel was made aware of the limitations of his power, and his need of the prophet Elisha.

Namaan risked losing all his power, and learnt of the greater power of God.

However, it was the slave girl and the servants, the ones with no names recorded, who actually made it all happen simply by speaking the right words at the right time. A different kind of power. A power that is often visible when the more obvious, the more vocal powers fail.

Every single day we are faced with problems with no apparent solution. Some of these are personal, they affect the people we love, and we feel despair. Some are the situations we read about in the papers - poverty, violence, unrest, war. We feel totally impotent.

Take heart. Consider the slave girl. She could not cure Namaan. But she knew that when we approach God he can help, she knew that God loves everyone, even those who have had nothing to do with him in their lives. She pointed the way. She spoke up.

Her words alone were not enough to ensure success of the mission. It depended upon many others along the way. But without her words, it would never have happened.

When we are brave enough to speak of God's help, of his healing love, who knows what we may set in motion. The story of Namaan show us that the real power to change lives rests in the most unlikely places and people. Amen.