

“A BIT ITCHY”
2 Kings 5:1-14, 2 Timothy 4:1-5

Naaman was a great soldier – a hero in the Aramean army. Everyone looked up to him and he was widely respected for his tactical know-how, his bravery and his wisdom. Legend has it that he was the man who had killed the Israelite King Ahab. Ben Hadad I, King of the Arameans, had promoted him to Commander of the Army and Naaman’s word was always obeyed. He knew how to do things – and he expected everyone else to behave in the same way. Wherever he went he was recognised and accorded honour and glory. In the Aramean Army of 850BC, Naaman was undoubtedly top dog.

But not everything was rosy in Naaman’s garden. There was one adversary he had been unable to defeat. He suffered from a form of skin disease which was unsightly and painful – as well as being potentially highly contagious. Not to put too fine a point on it, he was a leper. He wished he could get rid of it and he knew that it was both affecting his life in the present, and also shortening his prospects for the future. Despite his valour, his anxiety (not to mention the constant itching, which is one of the symptoms emphasised in *Leviticus 13*) was apparent to those who were closest to him. It even got to his wife, whose worry about the situation couldn’t be hidden from her newest servant girl, a young lass brought back as booty from one of Naaman’s latest campaigns in Israel.

After a while, as the servant girl got used to her new surroundings and grew in confidence with her mistress, she suggested that Naaman might do well to visit the Prophet who was so well known in her native land and who had a reputation for healing. So, desperate for any remedy, Naaman decided to follow up the advice. He spoke to Ben Hadad, who did as kings then always did – he got in touch with his Israelite counterpart, Joram. Now the truce between the two countries which had held since the death of Ahab at Ramoth Gilead, was still fairly uneasy, so when Naaman turned up at Joram’s court with a letter from Ben Hadad asking him to sort out this leper, the King of Israel suspected a plot. It wasn’t uncommon for kings to demand impossible things from their enemies so that they had a pretext for war when the demands couldn’t be delivered. “*He’s trying to pick a quarrel with me,*” was Joram’s response and his advisors went into panic mode. The panic spread as far as the Prophet, Elisha.

Cool as ever, secure in the knowledge that God was at work here, Elisha told Joram to send Naaman round to him and he’d sort him out. So Naaman, with his entourage of servants and his mules bearing expensive gifts, processed round to Elisha’s house and waited to be received by the Prophet. What he got was a message brought out by Elisha’s servant, that he should go and wash himself seven times in the local stream, the little muddy watercourse that the Israelites seemed to have a soft spot for and which they called Jordan.

Naturally Naaman was incensed. Not only did the Prophet send out an underling, but the message was to do something that was, frankly, really silly. Naaman might have considered doing it if the instruction was to bathe in one of the great rivers of Damascus – proper rivers, deep and wide and affording passers-by great views of the famous commander. But this was ridiculous and well beneath a man of his stature. He knew what he wanted the gods to do. He knew what the gods should say to a great man like him – and it wasn’t that he should go and dip in the Jordan! Fortunately, his servants had a rather firmer grasp on reality. Elisha’s instructions were simple enough, why not give them a try? Their powers of persuasion paid off and Naaman did as he was told. He did the simple thing – and when he emerged from the water after the seventh plunge, he was free of his disease.

You see, Naaman thought he could dictate to God what he wanted to hear – and, indeed, from whom he wanted to hear it. He wasn’t content with the basic, simple things which God was telling him. He wanted something more, something grander, something more complicated, something more worthy of him. But he wasn’t an isolated case. Let’s fast forward about 916 years to three decades or so after Jesus had returned to heaven. The great Apostle Paul had been put under house arrest by the Roman Emperor Nero, but he was anxious that the work of proclaiming the gospel should continue around the Mediterranean area and he wrote a letter to his young friend Timothy, who was looking after the church in Ephesus.

Paul sensed that the end was in sight as far as he was concerned, so he sent Timothy this letter full of advice about how he should fulfil his ministry, taking up the baton which Paul was soon to put down.

And in the section we've just read, Paul's advice is simple and clear: "*Preach the Word*" (v2). His task was to tell people about the amazing gospel of Jesus Christ and help them to live it out in their daily lives by reminding them of the things that are at the heart of their faith. It would involve "*correcting, rebuking and encouraging*" and would require "*great patience and careful instruction*" (v2). Part of the reason for this difficulty would be that people would, like Naaman, be subject to a bit of itching – but it wouldn't be leprosy or anything similar: it would be "*itching ears*". That's a bit of a figure of speech for the kind of curiosity which looks for interesting and spicy bits of information, which wants a bit more than the plain, unvarnished truth. People would start to look around for those who could tell them the things they wanted to hear, the things they thought they ought to hear. Just like Naaman, they thought they knew best what God should be saying and they really only wanted to listen to the people who could tell them that.

"*The Word*" which Paul (and now Timothy) had to communicate was very simple, really. As far as doctrine went, it was that men and women were alienated from God and needed to accept the offer of being put right with him again, an offer made possible through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. And that should be lived out in their daily lives by their loving God with every part of their being and loving their neighbours as they loved themselves. Unfortunately, that wasn't enough for the itchy-eared people. They wanted other stuff that told them about all the minutiae of dogma, all the other more complicated things that they felt they needed. They weren't about to be patronised by young Timothy telling them the basics.

So let's fast forward another one thousand nine hundred and forty years (you knew it was coming, didn't you?). It's still the same, isn't it? The Word is read or preached, and many people have their own idea of what they want to hear. Of course, people outside the Church think they know what they want, but Paul was writing to Timothy about people within the Church – and that's who we're talking to this morning. Every church is full of people with "*itching ears*", people who have their own, very fixed and, of course, very sound ideas about what God should be saying to them and how he should be saying it and through whom he should say it. Every now and then, some of them do go off after the teachers and preachers and speakers who fit into what they think is right.

The problem is that they don't always like being confronted with the basics. At the last church where I worked, some people complained about the simplicity of some of the teaching – it was just "*A-B-C preaching*" as far as they were concerned, and not worth their much more developed attention. And they think that God's word can be communicated only in a particular way – usually a specific style. I read a lot of books about preaching (in an effort to try and improve the quality of what you have to endure each week) and there are some books which will tell you quite categorically that there is no preaching other than expository preaching, preferably with an introduction, three points and a conclusion. God just doesn't speak in any other way! Even the Bible needs to be explained and expounded – you can't just read it!

And, what's more, he only speaks through those who have been properly trained and ordained and have been to the right college. Of course, there's a place for study and training and intellectual reflection about the Bible, but God can also make himself heard in many other ways – as we've seen recently as different people have given testimony here from the front, as The MOB challenged us last Sunday. A couple of weeks ago, just before a service which Liz was leading (and in which, I think, we heard from several other people), one of the elders said to me (admittedly not exactly in this context), "We don't need you any more". And, in a sense, that's true. An omnipotent God can speak in any way he wants to: you don't *need* a minister.

But the main thing for which people have "*itching ears*" is not necessarily the style of what is said, nor the person who says it, but the content. "*To suit their own desires, they will gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear.*" Many people do not want to be

confronted with the plain simple, unvarnished truth. They want more. They want a particular doctrinal stance. They want deeper, more complex arguments. They want stuff that sounds clever. Of course, if it's made more complicated, you can have fun discussing it – rather than actually doing it. If its couched in verbose and florid language, it makes the listeners appear more clever. If there are things that they can understand but others can't, then they appear holier, more advanced Christians – they've got what some others haven't, so they're closer to God. (That's really the heresy of Gnosticism, which Paul roundly condemns in his *Letter To The Colossians*.)

Let's face it, most of us can't cope with putting the simple stuff into practice, with the things that God asks of us as a bare minimum. Like Naaman, we don't want to bother with that, we want to get on to the superior stuff. A couple of quotations might help to clarify this. First, from Eugene Peterson. I know I often quote him, but he does have a knack of slicing through the garbage and getting to the heart of things, and this is from his introduction to the Letters of John in *The Message*:

“The two most difficult things to get right in life are love and God. More often than not, the mess people make of their lives can be traced to failure or stupidity or meanness in one or both of these areas. There are always people around who don't want to be pinned down to the God Jesus reveals. They want to make up their own idea of God, make up their own style of love.”

And this, from John Stott, in his commentary on Paul's Letter To Timothy:

“The criterion by which they judge teachers is not (as it should be) God's word but their own subjective taste. Worse still, they do not first listen and then decide what they have heard is true; they first decide what they want to hear and then select teachers who will oblige by toeing their line.”

As we've already said, God's Word is basically simple, but as we begin to put it into practice, so we can receive deeper insights into it. The Word we are to preach is that Jesus died for our sins and that we live out our response to that by loving God with our whole being and loving our neighbours as ourselves. At least, that's what Jesus says in *Mark 12:30,31*. As the Rabbis used to say, everything else is just a commentary on that. So why are we so loathe to do that and so eager to get embroiled in complicated arguments about the more difficult bits? Why are our ears itching for other things when we haven't yet sorted out our relationships with God and each other? How many of us come into church each week or open our Bibles each day totally open to what God might have to say to us – as opposed to looking for stuff to back up our own ideas?

Maybe it's the kind of pride that Naaman displayed as he decided that he was far too grand to obey the simple procedure that Elisha set out for him. Or maybe, like Naaman again, we are only really prepared to listen if the right person says it. Maybe we are like the people Paul and Timothy encountered who would rather spend time discussing elaborate “*myths*” – teachings that originally had a basis in God's word (in their case, the Old Testament) but which had, over the years been distorted and embellished almost beyond recognition.

After all, to say that it's all too simple, or that we are too mature, or spending time discussing stuff that is more or less speculation about the more obscure parts of the Bible, gives us a great excuse for not actually putting into practice what, deep down, we know is the priority. “We're discussing the Bible – don't expect us to be nice to each other. We're reflecting on what this all means in a post-modern context – don't think that we're going to keep our relationships in good repair. We're demonstrating our great love for God's word – we haven't got much time left to demonstrate our love for God himself.”

Writing to another pastor friend, Titus, Paul sums up the gospel, the Word of God, in these words (*Titus 2:11-14*). We are a people whom God has called and whom he wants to be “*eager to do good*.” That's the itch we really want, that desperation to *do* what God asks of us. When my dad used to be really eager to do something he always used to say, “I'm just itching to do that.” Forget Naaman's itching skin. Forget the itching ears of Timothy's congregation to talk about things other than the simple Word of God. Forget your own itch to occupy yourself exclusively with the stuff *you* think God should be doing and

saying. Ask God, by his Holy Spirit, to give you that itch to do good, that eagerness to get to grips with your love for God and for your neighbour.

Let's take a couple of moments to think about that and to pray about what it might mean for us. Pause and ask yourself if maybe you've lost your desire to do the right thing in your eagerness to do things right. Ask God to show you what you need to do as a result of what you've just heard. Ask God to scratch you where he knows you really do itch.

Discussion notes on the next page.

"A BIT ITCHY"
2 Kings 5:1-14, 2 Timothy 4:1-5

Naaman was a great soldier – a hero in the Aramean army of Ben Hadad I – but he was a leper. Hearing from a servant girl that Elisha could help, he went to Elisha's house and waited to be received by the Prophet. What he got was a message brought out by Elisha's servant, that he should go and wash himself seven times in the Jordan. Naaman was incensed. Not only did the Prophet send out an underling, but the message was to do something that was, frankly, really silly. Fortunately, his servants' powers of persuasion paid off and Naaman did as he was told. He did the simple thing – and when he emerged from the water after the seventh plunge, he was free of his disease. Naaman thought he could dictate to God what he wanted to hear – and, indeed, from whom he wanted to hear it. He wasn't content with the basic, simple things which God was telling him.

Centuries later Paul's advice to Timothy was simple and clear: "*Preach the Word*" (v2) It would involve "*correcting, rebuking and encouraging*" and would require "*great patience and careful instruction*" (v2). Part of the reason for this difficulty would be that people have "*itching ears*". They would start to look around for those who could tell them the things they wanted to hear, the things they thought they ought to hear. Just like Naaman, they thought they knew best what God should be saying and they really only wanted to listen to the people who could tell them that.

And it's still the same today. The Word is read or preached, and many people have their own idea of what they want to hear. Every church is full of people with "*itching ears*"; people who have their own, very fixed and, of course, very sound ideas about what God should be saying to them and how he should be saying it and through whom he should say it. The problem is that they don't always like being confronted with the basics. And they think that God's word can be communicated only in a particular way – usually a specific style. And he only speaks through those who have been properly trained and ordained.

The main thing for which people have "*itching ears*" is the content. Many people do not want to be confronted with the plain simple, unvarnished truth. They want more. Of course, if it's made more complicated, you can have fun discussing it – rather than actually doing it. If it's couched in verbose and florid language, it makes the listeners appear more clever. If there are things that they can understand but others can't, then they appear holier, more advanced Christians – they've got what some others haven't, so they're closer to God. (That's really the heresy of Gnosticism, which Paul roundly condemns in his *Letter To The Colossians*.)

"The two most difficult things to get right in life are love and God. More often than not, the mess people make of their lives can be traced to failure or stupidity or meanness in one or both of these areas. There are always people around who don't want to be pinned down to the God Jesus reveals. They want to make up their own idea of God, make up their own style of love." Eugene Peterson

"The criterion by which they judge teachers is not (as it should be) God's word but their own subjective taste. Worse still, they do not first listen and then decide what they have heard is true; they first decide what they want to hear and then select teachers who will oblige by toeing their line." John Stott

Writing to another pastor friend, Titus, Paul sums up the gospel, the Word of God, in these words – *Titus 2:11-14*. We are a people whom God has called and whom he wants to be "*eager to do good*." That's the itch we really want, that desperation to **do** what God asks of us: that eagerness to get to grips with our love for God and for our neighbour.

Questions for discussion

1. Why do you think people have "*itching ears*"?
2. It's often easier to talk about "The Word" than to do it – why?
3. Is there any place for discussion and reflection?
4. Why do we feel we need to expound and explain God's Word? Is it necessary?
5. What other ways do we find to avoid actually doing what God asks of us?
6. Why are we discussing this now? What are you going to do about it?