

**St Andrew's on The Terrace Sunday 7 July 2019 Pentecost 4**  
**'Bible – Literal or Symbolic: Bass Notes'**

**Readings for the Gathering**

**Hebrew Bible**

**Naaman Healed of Leprosy**

**2 Kings 5:1-14**

**5** Now Naaman was commander of the army of the king of Aram. He was a great man in the sight of his master and highly regarded ... He was a valiant soldier, but he had leprosy. **2** Now bands of raiders from Aram had gone out and had taken captive a young girl from Israel, and she served Naaman's wife. **3** She said to her mistress, "If only my master would see the prophet who is in Samaria! He would cure him of his leprosy."

**4** Naaman went to his master and told him what the girl from Israel had said. **5** "By all means, go," the king of Aram replied. "I will send a letter to the king of Israel." So Naaman left, taking with him gifts of money and clothing. **6** The letter he took to the king of Israel read: "With this letter I am sending my servant Naaman to you so that you may cure him of his leprosy." **7** As soon as the king of Israel read the letter, he tore his robes and said, "Am I God? ... Why does this fellow send someone to me to be cured of his leprosy? See how he is trying to pick a quarrel with me!"

**8** When Elisha the man of God heard the king of Israel had torn his robes, he sent this message: "Why have you torn your robes? Have the man come to me and he will know that there is a prophet in Israel." **9** So Naaman went with his horses and chariots and stopped at Elisha's house. **10** Elisha sent a messenger to say to him, "Go, wash yourself seven times in the Jordan, and your flesh will be restored, and you will be cleansed."

**11** But Naaman went away angry and said, "I thought that he would surely come out to me and stand and call on the name of the LORD his God, wave his hand over the spot and cure me of my leprosy. **12** Are not ... the rivers of Damascus, better than all the waters of Israel? Couldn't I wash in them and be cleansed?" So he .. went off in a rage.

**13** Naaman's servants went to him and said, "My father, if the prophet had told you to do some great thing, would you not have done it? How much more, then, when he tells you, 'Wash and be cleansed!'" **14** So he went down and dipped himself in the Jordan seven times, as the man of God had told him, and his flesh was restored and became clean like that of a young boy.

**Psalm**

**Psalm 30:11-12**

**11** You turned my wailing into dancing; you removed my sackcloth and clothed me with joy,

**12** that my heart may sing your praises and not be silent. My God, I will praise you forever.

**Contemporary reading**

from **"Heresy, holiness, and Oprah: Rob Bell interviewed"** by Ed Thornton

in *Church Times* 14 June 2018

<https://www.churchtimes.co.uk/articles/2018/15-june/features/features/heresy-holiness-and-oprah-rob-bell-interviewed>



Away from the demands of preaching weekly to a congregation of thousands, [Rob Bell] has done more or less as he pleases: hosting a weekly podcast ("The RobCast"); the comedy-club residency; writing books and a play; going on speaking tours; and surfing. He even had a slot on the Oprah Winfrey Network, in which he mixed motivational life-

coaching — "You have more power to create your life than you realise" — with exposition of the Hebrew scriptures. Unshackled from the expectations of a congregation, he has also voiced support for same-sex marriage. "Whoever you are, gay or straight, it is totally normal, natural, and healthy to want someone to go through life with," he told Oprah in one interview.

"The past few years have been. . . shall I use the word 'fun'?" Bell says. "It's just been absolutely amazing. . . The environment here in Los Angeles is . . . like being home." Bell's job and location might have changed, but his fundamental sense of calling has not: he believes the sermon is "an art form" which needs reclaiming as "somewhere between guerrilla theatre and performance art". "I've been trying to reclaim the sermon for everybody, not for a group of religious people over here, but for everybody, about what it means to be human."

This desire to open the sermon up to people outside Christian subcultures has always animated him, he says: it led to his starting Mars Hill, in a disused shopping mall; to his touring clubs and theatres with shows such as *Everything is Spiritual* and *The Gods aren't Angry*, and his hugely popular Nooma DVDs; and, ultimately, to where he is today, talking about Ecclesiastes in a sweaty comedy club.

People outside the churches are hungry for depth, he says. Western culture is consumed by “treble notes”, the “of-the-moment, pressing concerns, what hit the internet 17 minutes ago”. People increasingly crave “the bass notes”, he says: the deeper matters that human beings have talked about for thousands of years. “And when somebody can tell you a story, can quote a text, they can help you see that the thing that you are facing, that you are struggling with, that you are confronted by — oh yeah, people have been wrestling with that for thousands of years. And here’s some of the truths, some of the insights, some of the wisdom in the shared human experience. “It’s amazing how much we’re craving this. And especially as people leave what you think of as conventional religion — they’re desperate for bass notes.”

### **Reflection for the Gathering**

People outside the churches are hungry for depth, [Rob Bell] he says. Western culture is consumed by “treble notes”, the “of-the-moment, pressing concerns, what hit the internet 17 minutes ago”. People increasingly crave “the bass notes”, he says: the deeper matters that human beings have talked about for thousands of years. “And when somebody can tell you a story, can quote a text, they can help you see that the thing that you are facing, that you are struggling with, that you are confronted by — oh yeah, people have been wrestling with that for thousands of years. And here’s some of the truths, some of the insights, some of the wisdom in the shared human experience. “It’s amazing how much we’re craving this. And especially as people leave what you think of as conventional religion — they’re desperate for bass notes.”

Bass notes – what does Bell mean by that? He says they are “The deeper matters than human beings have talked about for thousands of years.” This is what I and others would call Myths – myths spelt with a capital M. Myths are those deeper matters which human beings have talked about for thousands of years, put into story form.

These myths are what I would call eternal – they are God-stuff. Divinely important to our lives, the things we care about deep down inside. Christianity and other religions put clothes on the body of the myths for us. If you have been brought up Christian or joined the Christian project you will have Christian clothes on your collection of myths. – the fight between good and evil will be personified for you in Jesus’ trial before Pilate. The release of people from crippling bondage will be described by you as the Exodus from Egypt. The poignancy of estrangement and alter reconciliation will be clothes for you in the garments of the story of the Prodigal Son. Even if you are uncomfortable about calling these stories myth because you don’t fully understand the importance of what being a myth is, these stories convey more to you that simply the plot enacted between a father and his two sons or as the mass migration of a nation of Hebrew slaves or the trial of a political prisoner before a regional governor keen to do the right thing in front of his emperor and the leaders of the nation he is occupying.

The stories deal with those deepest matters which people have been discussing for thousands of years – what is truth? How can we find freedom? Is there a way back when we have stuffed up?

These questions are the bass notes.

So how neglectful are we as the contemporary custodians of the bible, full of wisdom – ancient and yet more relevant to today’s bass notes questions than any tweet, email, blog, song lyrics or July 4 speech on Washington Mall.

Last week we sang a hymn where the bass notes were particularly important. In our life has its seasons, the beginning of each verse is syncopated. There is a bass note which has to happen before the first melody note can be sung. *Boom!* “our life has its seasons”, and then there is another at the beginning of the second line *Boom!* “and God has the reasons” and another at the beginning of the third line *Boom!*

“why spring follows winter and new leaves grow”. The same pattern follows for the next set of four lines of each chorus. Just like the *korero* on the *marae* cannot begin without the *karanga* happening first, so this hymn depends on that first bass note for the whole idea to unfold.

We are like that as people. “Without a vision the people perish” or, “without bass notes” the song of the universe falls flat.

It is not good enough to leave your critical thinking half done. Yes it can be a crushing blow to find out that the stories you have taken as literally God’s truth may not be as historically accurate as you once thought. It can seem as if the whole Bible, is falling apart like an ill-fitting jigsaw. But you don’t stop there. You don’t make the mistake of thinking that this rich treasure-box of stories is simply a bunch of primitive and inaccurate fairy tales. You ask the next question: “So if these are not the stories in the way I thought they were, how do they function as sacred stories? To stop once you had your first awakening would be like abandoning the Camino on the first day. Yet that is what many liberals and progressives have done and in doing so have left the world missing the bass notes without which their lives cannot sing.

So, in my mind and heart there is a continuing question. Maybe the cosiness and personal warmth of my older view of God won’t ever return, however much I work on a new interpretation for these days. But I want something more than an aridly intellectual reading of this book we call the Bible. I want bass notes which reverberate through my soul, bass notes which lead me forward, bass notes that vibrate in my mind and heat and soul. So, if I am not to read these stories literally, how do I read the myth underneath the judeo-christian disguise? Let’s try with Naaman’s story which popped up in the lectionary for this week. What is the underlying myth here.

The plain story is one of conquest and slavery. Naaman is on the winning side, chief military man for the king of Aram a territory to the north, essentially much of what is modern day Syria. They are a military threat hovering on the northern border of Israel. Raiders from Arum have recently done a sortie over the border and captured a few things including a young girl as slave. Naaman mighty man as he is, has developed a skin disease – perhaps leprosy but just as the word homosexuality is used to translate several conditions in the Bible, so leprosy was the English word chosen to translate skin diseases possibly of different sorts in the Bible. Whatever it is it is no disease for the commander of the army to have, so when a slightly bizarre idea is mentioned to Naaman, he thinks he will try the resources of the weaker, less well-resourced southern neighbour. This military stand off is why the king of Israel is wary of the request. He sees it as an excuse for an invasion of the Arum army. The intervention of the prophet is timely. He offers to help heal Naaman, but proud Naaman baulks at the instructions. In a rather Trump-like way he insists that the rivers of Syria are greater than the Jordan so why couldn’t he bathe in them to be healed? However, due to another wise intervention by a servant he obeys the instructions and is healed. That’s the straight story which a post Enlightenment mind might shot holes in at various points.

There are some bass notes lurking under the melody line of this ballad: You can have all the military might and power in your corner of the world, but it doesn’t mean you life will go well, you will keep your health. Money position and power are not everything in this world. It is timely that we are considering this story when Donald Trump has changed the usual Independence Day parade into a show of military might at considerable expense. I’ll leave you to make the connections with the bass notes.

Then, two interventions in this story are from servants. There is something here about the powerful needing to listen to those who are powerless. That the powerless and the vulnerable may have a kind of wisdom out of that very experience of poverty and involuntary submission which has taught them something about life – perhaps something about humility, or taking whatever chances you have, or like not throwing a good chance away, even though it seems bizarre and is certainly uncomfortable.

Also, the path to healing isn't always through the great and the good and the cleaner rivers of the more powerful country. The muddy brown Jordan, the least likely vehicle of transformation, was the river able to achieve healing in this mythic sense.

So how can these bass notes help us? Ever had a time when you thought you had risen to the top, that you were invulnerable able to cope with anyone and anything – then, boom! You find yourself toppling off the leading melody and stumbling around the bass clef of your life. Perhaps next time it happens you won't be so surprised. It's happened to me more than once. I think if we took a poll we would find quite a few hands going up. It's a good lesson to learn – not to trust a run of good fortune will last forever. Unfortunately it is a lesson once learned which is easy to forget.

Which people have given you the most reliable advice in your life? The rich and the famous, the skilled and the intelligent, or a small, humble person you wouldn't have thought had it in them to make such a heart stopping comment as they made to you just when you needed it? Has there been a time when unlike Naaman you brushed aside the comment and plunged on your way – only later to think. "I was told this might happen, I didn't believe it."

What provided the remedy to your bass note issues in life – something smooth and beautiful, a wide, flowing clean river of Syria – or the foreign, slightly brown trickle of the Jordan, the prophet's river.

When I was recovering from ME and gathered enough energy to worry slightly more effectively about earning money, I volunteered at a local knitwear shop to knit for them those jerseys that were in fashion for a while in the 90s with great big splashes of colour over them. I think the pay probably worked out at about a cent a stitch or less, but the humble task helped recover a sense of being an actor in my life rather than always only a reactor to what happened to me. Even when they sacked me because I wasn't actually good enough at knitting for their purposes, it had been a good experience – a right royal comedown from being Associate Principal of a local High School, but then, like Naaman, having a high-powered job hadn't prevented me from getting sick, looking back it had probably helped me to *get* sick.

I learned a few lessons about what was important from that reversal in my life. This story reminds me of the bass notes I discovered then – of the need for care, courage and cooperation with what is best for me rather than keeping up with the latest and the best.

Through thousands of years human beings have been pondering what is most important in life – jobs, power, status, humility, obedience, trusting the vulnerable, listening to those who are powerless rather than those who are powerful, taking the risks that we might end up looking stupid to others. These ponderings are what we need to have a good grounding for our social action and our forays out into the political; jungle on behalf of others.

This story suggests some answers to bass note questions like what is the best kind of power? Where can I find wisdom? How can I be healed? Where will I find wholeness? Who is the most significant people I can listen to? When life supplies us with these lessons and questions, stop and look and listen and sniff the air about you. If you take a moment to really, really notice what is going on, you might conclude, as Luke Skywalker of Star Wars fame would, that The Force is with you; that you are being provided in this ancient manuscript with mythic stories if you would but dig deep into them; that the instruments of the cosmos are playing the bass notes we need, so we can sing the song of the heart.

We might even sing the song of the heart in the words of the psalmist who must have had an experience like Naaman's: *"11 You turned my wailing into dancing; you removed my sackcloth and clothed me with joy, 12 that my heart may sing your praises and not be silent. My God, I will praise you forever."*

So may it be, Amen

Susan Jones 027 321 4870 [minister@standrews.org.nz](mailto:minister@standrews.org.nz) 04 909 9612