

Luke in Your Neighbourhood 7  
The Faith of a Gentile Centurion

Luke 7:1-10

The Soldier walks forward slowly in the jungle. His task is to protect villagers from terrorists; every step means danger. Suddenly a command reaches him on his radio. His senior officer has seen where the enemy are hiding. He must obey instantly, not only for his own sake but in order to get the job done. It isn't what he was expecting, but he has been trained to do what he is told without hesitation. That kind of clear authority and automatic obedience is vital in certain dangerous jobs. Authority like this works almost like a machine: an order goes out from the top, passing on the word to those below them.

Most of us don't live in very tight or clear authority structures. There are always people that we respect; in our places of work, there are people whose decisions we accept and go along with, and whose instructions we carry out. But we can then make the mistake of thinking that God's authority is somewhat less definite, more like the less direct models of authority we have known in other aspects of our own lives. It's true, of course, that God's sovereignty over the world is exercised with such love and compassion that the image of a commanding officer organizing a battle or a route march is hardly the best picture to use. But if we see God's authority, at work in Jesus Christ, as any less absolute than that of a military officer, we are, according to the passage, not only mistaken but also lacking faith itself.

You see the heart of the story is not the healing of the slave; that's important, because without it the story would not exist, but it's just the framework for what Luke wants to highlight. What matters is the centurion's faith. What matters today is my faith and your faith. Here he was, a middle-ranking military officer, stationed in Capernaum. He would be receiving regular orders from a commander, probably in Caesarea, about 50

miles away. And he would have soldiers responsible to him for performing tasks locally, perhaps including peacekeeping. Often soldiers in that position would despise the local people as an inferior race, but this man didn't. He had come to love and respect the Jewish People and had even paid for the building of the local synagogue. Luke presents him to us, as he does another centurion in Acts 10, as a humble Gentile, looking in at Israel and Israel's God for the outside, liking what he sees, and opening himself to learning new truth from this strange, ancient way of life. Matthew's version of the story (8:5-13) is shorter, and omits the elaborate detail with which Luke emphasizes his respect and humility, sending two groups of messengers to Jesus.

Now Jesus is astonished at the second message; and we are astonished at his astonishment! Normally in the gospels Jesus does and says things that surprise people; this is one of the few places where Jesus himself is surprised. And the reason is the sheer quality of the man's faith. This faith isn't an abstract belief about God or the learning of dogmas. It is the simple, clear belief that when Jesus commands that something be done, it will be done. He regards Jesus like a military officer, with authority over sickness and health. If Jesus says that someone is to get well, they will. What could be simpler? Where he got this faith, we don't know. If he had lived in Capernaum for a while, he had not doubt heard of Jesus and perhaps seen him perform remarkable healings already. He recognized that there was a power at work in Jesus that could carry all before it. Like yet another centurion, later on (23:47), he looked at Jesus and was prepared to risk more than Jesus' own fellow-Jews had done, and declare that God was at work in him. "Truly this was the Son of God". (Luke's 3 Centurions: Luke 7 Faith and Authority 23 Who Jesus is Acts 10 becomes Christian and filled with Spirit)

The story thus opens up in a practical way some of what the teaching in the previous chapter had highlighted. There was no

need for Jesus' fellow-Jews to protect themselves from a Gentile like this, by drawing tighter and tighter circles of holiness around themselves. And there is not need today for the Contemporary Church, particularly historic Denominations, to do the same. It's a religious dead end! For all his lack of appropriate religious background, he had grasped the very centre of the Jewish faith; that the one true God, the God of Israel, was the sovereign one, the Lord of heaven and earth. And he had grasped it in its shocking new form; *this one true God was personally present and active in Jesus of Nazareth.* Luke presents this Gentile as the model for all those who come in by faith from outside God's ancient people, to share the blessings of healing and salvation. And it remains the best and only model today for how else can we come to Jesus but by faith.

Now I could whiz off at the tangent and preach a short exaltation on Faith to you all now but that's not what I believe the Lord wants me to do.

There is I believe/discern a parable here of where the contemporary Church in the UK is at this present time: two directions sit uncomfortably with each other.

The first is characterised by the Jews of Capernaum: good and godly people, blessed by a synagogue and the friendship/support of the local centurion but missing the clear implication in the encounter of who Jesus is. Their love and allegiance is more for the heritage and institution than the Living God who is the one whom it all points to and is about. Go to Capernaum today and you will see the ruins of one of the finest synagogues in that area but no living community of faith. Ironically they helped the Centurion connect with Jesus and then didn't connect themselves!! They continued to wait for a Messiah that had already come.

The second is characterised by the Centurion of Capernaum and the surrounding area: a good and godly man seeking the living God, happy to help and support the local faith community, but looking for more than mere religious allegiance. The Centurion having encountered and experienced Jesus, I think, choose to Follow Him. Having experienced God in the flesh he concluded that it didn't compare with buckets full of the most perfect of all religions. "Truly this was the Son of God".

Sadly as a Pastor I still seem to run into sincere lovely and loving people who seem more interested in the modern day synagogue, and whose love and allegiance seems to be more for the Institution or denomination and its heritage than the living Christ. They assail the Contemporary Church at every turn with not keeping the rules (man made ones) and somehow believe that denominational purity will get one in heaven. Contrast the Centurion: the synagogue (which he had built) was not important because he was wise enough to look beyond it and to realise that what was needed was for him to put his trust in Jesus and by faith follow Him. Not dead stones but being Living Stones fashioned by God into the Body of Christ.

Thank God that for many, hopefully most, at St Andrews, new and not so new, the spiritual penny has dropped: following Jesus, living by faith, and being a post denominational Grace Community called the Body of Christ (a Church with Ragged Edges) is not only where we want to be but also the place of transformation and fruitfulness for us and for Canterbury. I with my fellow Pastors/Ministers have a deep desire and its this: that our time and effort be not be focused on Synagogue and heritage issues but on what really matters: bringing people into a trusting faith relationship with Jesus, maturing and equipping them, or in the words of John 14:12 "doing the Stuff Jesus did".

So contrast the prayer in our reading of this centurion with the prayers we all too often pray ourselves. "Lord", we say (not out loud, of course, but this is what we often think), "I might perhaps like you to do this.... but I know you may not want to, or it might be too difficult, or perhaps impossible...." and we go on our way puzzled, not sure whether we've really asked for something or not. Of course, sometimes we ask for something and the answer is No. God reserves the right to give that answer. But this story shows that we should have no hesitation in asking. The key issue: is Jesus the Lord of the world, or isn't he? The Centurion certainly knew what he felt about that. May the Contemporary Church of Jesus Christ also have at its heart this Living Faith thus animating the Living Stones of Canterbury to bring Life to all: for the only brand label that matters is Christ himself.

Pastor David

January 19<sup>th</sup> 2014