

Sermon – 17/04/2011 pm

Such Great Faith

Study Text: Luke 7:1-10

What a beautiful story we have in this passage. A rich and powerful man shows great kindness towards one of his servants. The man is a Roman soldier. He is a Gentile. The servant or slave may have been a Jew. The Roman was doing all he could to save this servant from dying. He had heard about Jesus; that Jesus was healing lots of sick people.

Jesus was a Jew. The Roman could have demanded this Jew come to help his slave. The Romans were the occupying power in Israel. But this man said he was unworthy to have Jesus come. The story is not only beautiful; it is also amazing, an amazing story of kindness, humility and faith on the part of a Gentile; and of grace and power on the part of Jesus.

1. Kindness

Jesus went up on the mountain to pray and in the morning he chose the twelve. He came down to a level place where a crowd had gathered. They wanted to touch Jesus and be healed. They were healed and they were taught what it means to be a true follower of Jesus. He preached the Kingdom of God, the kingdom of truth and righteousness. Following the sermon he went back to Capernaum.

On the way he was met by some Jews who pleaded with him to come and heal the centurion's servant. In Matthew's account of this incident we read that the centurion came to Jesus pleading for help. It may be that this happened later and that Luke does not mention it. But it is more likely that Matthew abbreviates the story by speaking of the centurion's emissaries as the man himself. Both gospels record the centurion as saying 'I am not worthy that you should come under my roof' (7:6, Matthew 8:8).

Before looking further at the centurion's humility we must comment on his kindness. He was asking for help, not for himself but for his slave. For most Romans a slave would have been expendable. Slaves were bought and sold in the market place. Often they were prisoners of war. But this man was different. He was attached to his slave. His slave was precious to him. He would do all he could to help his sick slave.

Why was this centurion so kind? Roman soldiers were usually tough and uncaring. They were rough and violent. By the grace of God, by the common grace of God this pagan man was a kind man. We know unbelievers who are kind people. This is because of God's grace. All believers should be kind and compassionate because of the special grace of God. Special grace is found in Jesus Christ. Kindness is a grace that all can understand. In showing kindness we show the love of God. Kindness is a powerful witness of the love of God.

We had a servant who worked in our house in India – as strange as that may seem. She was not a slave, although some people did treat their servants badly. One day our servant's baby got very sick. She had taken it to a quack doctor who gave the wrong medication. The tiny baby was dying. We tried to help. At the time I had an old car – a 1938 Ford – with a flat battery. We pushed the car to get it started and drove down to the village. I remember the day well because it was the first time I prayed in the local language, saying a number of times 'Jesus have mercy'.

As we drove to the city hospital my wife was in the back with the baby pleading for this baby to live – she thought it had died. At the hospital we ran in with the baby. The nurse and doctor were surprised to see a western couple with an Indian baby. They treated the baby and wonderfully he survived. We saw him recently – a healthy 25 year old man. When the servant took her baby home she threw all the idols out of her house and put her faith in Jesus. Although illiterate she can now read her Bible. She still has a Sunday school for the children in her village.

The centurion was kind to his servant. He was also kind to the local Jews. That the elders would actually plead earnestly with Jesus on his behalf is remarkable. They said ‘he loves our nation and has built us a synagogue’ (7:5). The centurion was a foreigner but he came to love this nation. So much so that he built the people a place of worship.

Would he do this without having an interest in who was worshipped in this place? Some suggest this man was a God-fearer, a monotheist who worshipped the God of the Jews without becoming a proselyte or full convert to Judaism. The centurion Peter went to visit in Caesarea was a God-fearer (Acts 10:2).

The Jews pleaded with Jesus saying this man was deserving of help (7:4). We cannot agree with their assessment because no one is deserving of Jesus’ help. We might anticipate Jesus correcting them on this point of doctrine but he does not. Reading on we see that this was not the centurion’s attitude. He said he was not worthy to meet with Jesus. Jesus knew this, so he overlooked the mistaken belief of the Jews. He graciously went with them towards the house of the centurion.

2. Humility

As Jesus got close to the house, the centurion sent friends to Jesus with a message expressing great humility and understanding. He did not want to trouble Jesus any further. Was he worried that it was unlawful for Jesus, a Jew, to enter the house of a Gentile (Acts 10:28)? He was certainly apprehensive about meeting Jesus. But his apprehension was not because Jesus was a Jew – he had many Jewish friends.

The centurion’s apprehension arose from his understanding that Jesus was not just another Jew. There was something different about Jesus. He was a man with unique authority and power. He was a man before whom even a commander in the Roman army must humble himself. ‘I am unworthy even to meet with Jesus’ he said.

Jesus took note of these words. Peter had expressed similar unworthiness when he saw the great catch of fish – *depart from me Lord for I am a sinful man* (5:8). But Jesus rarely heard such sentiment from the Jews. The Jewish elders came to Jesus saying this Roman was worthy of his help. Other Jewish leaders came to Jesus demanding signs and wonders. They got none. They got no blessing from the Lord.

God resists the proud but gives grace to the humble (Proverbs 3:34). Jesus said *he who exalts himself will be humbled and he who humbles himself will be exalted* (Luke 18:14). *Humble yourself in the sight of the Lord and he will lift you up* (James 4:10). Remember the blessing this centurion received when he humbled himself before Jesus. His servant was healed and he was saved.

3. Faith

What happens at the end of this story? We come to Jesus’ response to the man’s request and to his words. Wonderfully his slave was healed. Jesus never got to the house. The centurion never met

Jesus. Jesus never touched the slave, but he was healed. He was healed when Jesus heard of the man's humility and of his great faith – and that without even a word!

This story is out of its time in some ways. Why is this? Not only is the centurion a Gentile to whom the gospel did not come till after the death and resurrection of Jesus, but he believed without seeing Jesus. *Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed* said Jesus (John 20:29).

Peter wrote *though now you do not see him yet believing you rejoice* (I Peter 1:8). We are those who believe without having seen Jesus. I trust you are not waiting for Jesus to appear so you can touch him before you believe! We have faith like that of the centurion – right?

The centurion commanded a company of 100 men. He also had servants under his authority. When he gave orders they were carried out. He was himself a man under authority (7:8). He knew about authority and about the power of words. The army is different to politics. When he heard about Jesus it was probably about his power to heal and cast out demons.

Jesus must have authority over sickness and over demons to be doing this. That is why the centurion asked for him to heal his slave. At first he wanted to Jesus to come and touch his servant and heal him. But while Jesus was coming a profound understanding came to him. Jesus just has to say the word and the man will be healed.

Jesus, like him, was in a position of authority. He was under authority, and in authority. The difference was the nature of Jesus' authority. Jesus had authority in the supernatural realm. He had authority in the spiritual realm. This man was close to seeing Jesus as the Son of God. He was close to seeing Jesus as the word become flesh and dwelling among us. Indeed, the words of Jesus indicate he believed in Jesus as his Lord.

Upon hearing what the centurion understood about authority Jesus said *I have not found such great faith, not even in Israel* (7:9). Jesus marvelled at what this man said. This man understood who Jesus was. He understood the power and authority of Jesus was no less than the power and authority of God.

'I also am a man under authority' the centurion said. He recognised Jesus was exercising divine authority. What an amazing understanding – and not just understanding but belief. Recognising who Jesus is he humbled himself before Jesus and believed in him. He believed his word. He believed that *at the name of Jesus every knee should bow and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of God the Father* (Philippians 2:10-11).

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