

“Just Say The Word” – Luke 7:1-11 – May 29, 2016

We are always helped when trying to understand a passage from the bible by setting the passage into its context, both literary (i.e. where the text is placed relative to other texts) and historically (i.e. when do the events in the passage take place relative to other events). For example, today’s reading from Luke appears fairly early in Luke’s gospel, about one-third of the way through; the events also occur near the beginning of Jesus’ ministry, and so the literary context at first glance seems to match the historical context – which is not always the case! Specifically this healing event follows closely upon Jesus’ “Great Sermon” that he delivered to his new disciples after he returned from his isolation in the wilderness. The introduction to our text affirms this, stating “After he had ended all his sayings ...” and then provides a new setting with Jesus entering Capernaum.

But that reference to Capernaum causes us to raise our eyebrows ... recall the earlier incident in Chapter 4 where Jesus, fresh from the wilderness, is in the synagogue in Nazareth where he quotes from Isaiah and declares “today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.” When the crowd reacts to this Jesus responds saying to them, "Doubtless you will quote to me this proverb, 'Doctor, cure yourself!' And you will say, 'Do here also in your hometown the things that we have heard you did at Capernaum.'" Perhaps he had already done other healing things in Capernaum, but our reading today from a later incident in Chapter 7 is the only record we have of Jesus healing there.

Exactly when or in which sequence the healing of the centurion’s slave actually took place we cannot know, but I believe Luke deliberately provides it in some detail here following the Great Sermon. That sermon, which begins with the Beatitudes (“blessed are ...”), is a profound set of sayings and teachings from Jesus, and the best way to emphasise that the teacher has the authority to say such things is to provide credentials in the form of litany of experiences and demonstrations of power. And so the healing of the centurion’s slave is paired with the raising from death the young man of Nain, and then the affirmation is solidified in the encounter between Jesus and the emissaries from John the Baptist. These three (recall that three witnesses were required to positively affirm a fact or action!) CV items serve to put the stamp of authentic power upon Jesus, giving him the credibility to say all that he said in the Great Sermon.

What was peculiar or notable about the healing incident from today’s reading? Several things stand out, the first being that the person making the appeal to Jesus was a centurion whom we usually (and probably rightfully) assume is a non-Jew. We leap to that assumption primarily because the title or role of centurion was a Roman military rank, held only by a Roman citizen. While it is possible that the centurion was Jewish, our assumption that he was not is bolstered by his sending Jewish elders to make the plea to Jesus for help, and more so by the elders claiming not that he was a faithful Jew but rather a very generous benefactor; moreover their phrase “he loves our people” seems a pretty good indicator that he was not one of “our people.”

We also note the distinction between the first group the centurion sent to Jesus to ask him to come heal his slave and the second group sent to relay his message of don’t come, just say the word. Where that first group was a number of Jewish religious officials (elders) the second group consisted of friends of the centurion. What is perhaps a more interesting comparison is the message each group brought – the elders proclaiming “he is worthy” but the friends echoing his own proclamation of “I am not worthy.”

Ultimately, however, we note the message from the centurion via his friends to Jesus: “just say the word” with an explanation that the centurion understood and lived by the concept of “chain of command” and an implicit understanding that Jesus stood at the very top of that chain,

or at least was the chief Adjutant of God, able to make things happen with a single command. We recognize this as a profound statement of faith, an understanding that Jesus affirms with his declaration that this example of faith exceeded anything he had seen in all of Israel. But did you, or do you, notice the one key element that is missing from this whole incident?

That's right ... Jesus does not say "the word" – no imperious command; no religious incantation; no magic formula. Apart from Jesus' affirmation of the centurion's faith he says nothing, and yet the slave is healed. Clearly the incident portrays Jesus' power as utterly unlimited, enabling him to heal a dying man even at a distance without so much as a word.

So, what do we draw from this story? How does the healing of an unnamed slave two millennia ago in a far-off land shape our lives? First and foremost we come away with a refreshed and renewed affirmation of the power of God at work in Jesus, an affirmation that solidifies and bolsters our belief that the words he did say, the promises he did make, come with that full authority. Especially with the words of Pentecost still ringing in our ears we understand that the healing power of God through the Holy Spirit promised by Jesus still flows around and through us, waiting to respond to our request to "come, touch my life."

Secondly we recognize that the faith of the centurion was connected to the church of the day; his faith was not practiced in personal isolation similar to today's "spiritual but not religious" mantra. The testimony of the Jewish elders affirmed the centurion's participation in the religious life of the community, building a synagogue and presumably worshiping there as well, a man not only known to the faith community but deemed worthy by them through his participation.

Lastly we come away with perhaps a new understanding of the kind of faith that Jesus considered to be the best. The centurion's faith merged a rock-solid belief that Jesus could do what was needed with a realistic sense of self-worth. He obviously respected Jesus enough that he thought it appropriate to send religious representatives (and note that they were elders, not rabbis!) to plead his case with Jesus, while at the same time didn't want Jesus to "waste" time coming to see him in person. It's pretty clear that the centurion wasn't looking for Jesus to come and put on a grand performance or to focus on pleasing him, but instead he really, really just wanted the slave to be healed. Some might cynically argue that this request was venal, that the slave merely represented a valuable economic asset and thus the centurion was asking of Jesus a favour that might be expressed as "restore my financial status"; however, it is fairly clear from the original Greek that the slave meant a lot more to the centurion than just an economic benefit, that he had a genuine concern for this person.

From these understanding of faith we have a prototype for our own faith. Our faith does not need to be extravagant or showy, nor does it need to be bolstered by loud acclamations. At the heart of our faith we simply need to believe that God really does care about us and our concerns – cared enough to send Jesus into the world to provide redemption for us, cared enough to send the Holy Spirit, still cares enough to listen to and respond to our requests. In faith we can ask for what we need, confident that our requests are heard and considered and acted upon, although like in this story the results may not be flashy, or spectacular, or even obvious at the time, but still appropriate and effective. And as a final point we can recognize and celebrate that our faith is also, like the centurion's, best lived out in the community of faith. May God grant us the wisdom to hold such faith and to use it to guide our lives.