

The centurion and his slave

2 6 13

O God,
the strength of all those who put their trust in you,
mercifully accept our prayers
and, because through the weakness of our mortal nature
we can do no good without you,
grant us the help of your grace
that in keeping your commandments
we may please you both in will and deed.

Our text may be found in today's gospel – Luke chapter 7 and verse 2:

'A centurion there had a slave whom he valued highly
and who was ill and close to death'

Who do you value ? Who is dear to you ? Who is precious in your sight ? Here, in Luke chapter 7, we have an account of an extraordinary event in Capernaum early on in Jesus' ministry and in Matthew chapter 8 verses 5 - 11 you can find a parallel, shorter version of this miracle of healing.

The whole is set out in the first ten verses of Luke chapter seven. Jesus is coming back into Capernaum when he is met by some Jewish elders who ask him to come and cure a sick slave who's on the point of dying. Jesus agrees and is on his way to do so when the slave's owner sends some friends to say that there is no need

for Jesus actually to come in person, but he only has to say the word and his servant will be healed. Jesus does and the boy is.

The summary is accurate but does not do justice to the extraordinary event Luke retells. The centurion is unnamed but this Roman soldier is an exceptional man. He's a Gentile, an officer in the occupying army stationed in Capernaum, but out of his own pocket, he has financed the building of a synagogue in the town. His admiration for a faith not his own is practical and he has earned the respect of the Jewish elders who run the synagogue and they are prepared to go and speak to Jesus on his behalf.

He owns a slave. His servant is ill and is in the process of dying. Slavery was normal in the Roman Empire – you owned a slave body and soul and he was your property and you could do what you liked with him, treat him well or treat him badly – he had no rights under law. When a slave was of no more use to you, then you replaced him just as we would today a washing machine or a vacuum cleaner. We don't know his name or how old he was, simply we know that his owner actually values him.

In Luke's account of the miracle, the centurion does not come to Jesus himself. That others speak for him suggest he is a man who is respected. That he does not come, in a curious way, shows how much he respects Jesus. A Gentile, a non-Jew, the Centurion keeps a respectful distance between him and the man whose help he seeks.

But what is truly extraordinary is this soldier's insight into the real authority that Jesus has. His friends meet Jesus on the way to the Centurion's house and stop him. They convey the Centurion's humility: that he is not worthy that Jesus should come under his roof. They convey his confidence in Jesus' power to heal. As an officer in the Roman army, the Centurion understands the nature of orders: if he tells one of his soldiers to do something, then it's done; if he tells one of his slaves to do something, then it is done; he knows and trusts that if Jesus speaks the word, then it will be done – and wonderfully it is – his boy is healed.

The story teaches us to value people and to respect them. The miracle gives us a peculiar insight into the nature of the spiritual authority Jesus had and his power to heal. The Centurion and his slave are not named but they like the Samaritan or the Syro-Phoenician woman are foreigners, outsiders who by what they do and what they believe are true followers of the way. May we follow their example, loving those who are close to us, with whom we come in contact and by trusting in Jesus as our Lord and Saviour.

I have spoken in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,
Amen.

St Bartholomew's, Dinard

2nd June, 2013

G: Sermons 28 : The centurion and his slave

