

A question of faith

29 5 16

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

Today's text may be found in Luke chapter 7 and verse 9:

'Not even in Israel have I found such faith'

In our four readings today, what has Elijah in our passage from 1 Kings, the Psalmist in Psalm 96, Paul at the opening of his letter to the Galatians, and the Centurion in today's gospel from Luke have in common ?

My answer would be faith. Elijah's faith is such that he can confront the prophets of Baal, challenge them to call down fire from heaven and believe that they will fail while he will succeed in demonstrating the real power and presence of the God of Israel. The Psalmists demonstrates his faith in God by the enthusiasm he has for praising God in song, using such inspiring language as **'Worship the Lord in the beauty of holiness.'** Paul's faith is personal as is his experience of Jesus: he was

not one of the Twelve yet he has been gifted with direct knowledge and understanding of our Lord which he burns to share with others. And, finally, the example of the Centurion in Capernaum who believes that Jesus has the power and authority to heal his beloved servant – and, of course, he does.

So there is the potential for four sermons in our readings today but since you know that I like to keep my sermons short, let me just concentrate on the Centurion whose faith Jesus praises: **‘Not even in Israel have I found such faith’**

Jesus has just arrived in Capernaum. A centurion, who is stationed in the town, hears that Jesus is there. A slave whom he greatly values is ill and dying. He sends some of the Jewish leaders of the synagogue, which he paid to be built, to go and ask Jesus on his behalf to come and heal his slave. Jesus complies but while he is still on his ways, some friends of the centurion meet Jesus and simply say that it is not necessary for him actually to come to the centurion’s house to heal the slave but simply command it to happen and it will. So Jesus does and it does. End of story.

But the real interest in this example of faith in Jesus’ power to heal lies in the detail.

First the slave. Slaves in this society were not regarded as people, human beings with rights – they were the property of those who owned them. Rather like a domestic appliances nowadays: you don’t get them repaired, you simply throw them away when they don’t work anymore and go out buy the latest model. No

detail about the slave, no name, no age, simply the word for slave, δουλος (doulos), tells us he's male. We don't know how long he's been with the centurion, but we do know the centurion appreciates his slave's service. The word that the NRSV translates as 'valued highly', the AV renders as 'dear unto him' in Greek is εντιμος (entimos), which can mean prized, so clearly, surprisingly, the slave does have real worth in the eyes of his master.

Secondly, the fact that this unnamed Roman is sympathetic to the Jewish faith so much so that he actually is ready and willing to give money to build a synagogue for them there in Capernaum. Whether or not the Centurion is a proselyte is not stated but he is clearly sympathetic and supportive of Jews and Judaism. Why else would Jews, who have standing in the community, take the trouble to go and speak on his behalf to Jesus ?

Thirdly, on his way to the Centurion's house, Jesus is stopped. Again, not by Centurion but by friends with this request. Order the healing to happen and it will. The Centurion is an officer in the Roman army, used to giving orders which are obeyed. Jesus' power is spiritual; if he orders something to happen it will. Remarkably the Centurion equates Jesus' real power in the spiritual realm with his as authority a soldier. Why does the Centurion fail to come to see and speak to Jesus in person ? Does he feel that unworthy to be in the presence outranks him ?

Lastly, our text holds up this centurion as a model of faith. Luke's gospel is noted for drawing attention to the outsider: Samaritan's, lepers, women, Gentiles and

here, in the Centurion, is another example of the fact that our faith will spread out beyond the Chosen People of Israel to all mankind.

And so, this morning, before us is an example of remarkable faith – a Centurion who believes Jesus can order his slave to be well again. It is faith in God's power to heal, in Jesus' authority in the hidden spiritual realm. And the challenge to us today is to ask how much faith do we have in a God who loves us more than we will ever know or can deserve ?

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

Preached at the Eucharist

St Bartholomew's, Dinard

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G: Sermons 34 : Faith

