

## Fourth Sunday After Pentecost

Matthew 8:5-13: Jesus Heals a Centurion's Servant



An office manager was complaining in their staff meeting that he wasn't getting any respect. The next day, he attached a small sign to his office door: 'The Boss!' Later that day, he returned from lunch to find that somebody had attached a note over his sign. It read, "Your wife called. She wants her sign back."

Today's gospel reading, I am sure, will be very familiar to many of us. The basic elements of the story are few. The centurion, a Roman, has complete confidence that Jesus is able to heal his servant. When the Lord expresses willingness to go to his house, the centurion humbly objects, declaring himself unworthy of such a visit and reveals his profound faith in Jesus: ***"Speak the word only, and my servant shall be healed."*** The centurion then explains his status – he has soldiers under him and is himself under authority. Our Lord's reaction must have surprised those who witnessed the scene. He declares that He has not found such great faith in Israel; those chosen to be the children of the kingdom would be cast out and replaced by others. Finally, He tells the centurion to go his way and that his servant is healed. Clearly this narrative is about faith, but to see it simply as 'faith' is a little iniquitous. This is faith grounded in complete humility.

When the centurion speaks to Jesus of his position, he is not boasting. In fact, it is quite the contrary, (v9) ***"For I also am a man under authority."*** That is the key expression. He derives his authority from another and applies it in the line of duty. St. John Chrysostom describes the implications: "I also am a man under authority': that is, Thou art God, and I man; I under authority, but Thou not under authority. If I, therefore, being a man, and under authority, can do so much; far more He, both as God and as not under authority".

How the centurion came to his faith is not explained by St. Matthew. However, St. Luke's account of the same event offers a clue (Lk 7: 1-10). St. Luke tells us of how Jewish friends of the centurion intercede with Jesus on his behalf. plead his case. St. Luke tells us that the man's Jewish friends – identified as elders – considered him worthy of Jesus' good favour, although they are impressed by something other than his faith, saying that the centurion is ***"... deserving for he loves our nation, and he hath built us a synagogue"*** (7:4-5).

These 'Friends' seem to have missed those qualities possessed by the centurion that really matter his humility, faith, and concern for another. It is evident that the Centurion loved this particular servant so deeply that he risked public humiliation by begging publicly for his life. He, a Roman soldier, in the streets of Judea, before a bunch of Jews who are more likely to hate him than anything, comes and begs to an itinerant rabbi. We can easily overlook just how shocking the Centurion's actions are. A Gentile, someone who had no business asking Jesus for help, comes, address Jesus as Lord, and begs Him for help. That simply did not happen in those days.

That's why Jesus "was amazed" at centurion's faith. "Not even in Israel," the Jewish nation, did Christ find such faith. This is an extremely strong and condemning statement. The Jews were supposed to be the carriers of the true faith, the nation that was to prepare the whole world for the coming Messiah. Yet, this Gentile expressed stronger faith than anyone in Israel. Jesus goes on to tell the crowd that ***people "will come from east and west and sit down with Abraham and Isaac and Jacob in the Kingdom of Heaven."*** The Jews also expected, only the Jews to be present at this banquet. But what Jesus is saying is that "outsiders," non-Jews, will come from

east and west, meaning from all over the world, and take the places, which the Jews assumed were theirs. The Jews, mistakenly, believed that their ethnic allegiance to Abraham, was enough to inherit the Kingdom of Heaven. Christ tells them that only the allegiance and faith in Him as the Lord, will save us. That same faith shown in the humble confession of the Centurion.

As St James clearly tells us (James 2 v 20) ***“... faith without works is dead”; And Humility is a prerequisite for the spiritual life i.e., life in Christ. In the Orthodox tradition, humility has often been called the “mother of all virtues,”***

True Humility does not mean degradation or remorse. It does not mean effecting some sort of demeaning external behaviour. It does not mean considering oneself as the most vile and loathsome of creatures. Christ Himself was humble and He did not do this. God Himself, according to the spiritual tradition of the Church, has perfect humility, and He certainly does not act in this way. Genuine humility means to see reality as it actually is in God. It means to know oneself and others as known by God—a power, according to Saint Isaac, greater than that of raising the dead! The humble lay aside all vanity and conceit in the service of the least of God’s creatures, and to consider no good act as beneath one’s dignity and honour. Humility is to know oneself, without the grace of God, as dust, sinful and dead. We are all called to follow the example of Christ in His divine humility. As Saint Paul teaches:

***“Do nothing from selfishness or conceit, but in humility count others better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to his own interests, but also to the interests of others. Have this mind among yourselves, which you have in Christ Jesus, who though He was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied Himself, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form He humbled Himself and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross. Therefore God has highly exalted Him and bestowed on Him the name which is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus is Lord, to the glory of God the Father”***

(Phil 2.3–11).

Remembering that ...

“God resisteth the proud, but giveth grace unto the humble” (James 4:6)



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