

C Ordinary 9
2013 June 2
Psalm 96
Galatians 1.1-12
Luke 7.1-10
"The Centurion"

Officer: "Soldier, do you have change for a dollar?" Soldier: "Sure, buddy." Officer: "That's no way to address an officer! . Now let's try it again!" Officer: "Soldier. Do you have change for a dollar?"
Soldier: "No, SIR!"

In today's reading from Luke, we encounter a centurion, what is literally in the Greek text "an authority over 100." What do we think we know about these guys called centurions, anyway? As their name implies, they were commanders over about 100 Roman soldiers. Often their units were actually smaller than 100. The office of centurion had existed since the beginning of the Roman republic, around 500 BC. That would be contemporaneous with the time when the Israelites were rebuilding Jerusalem after their return from Exile in Babylon.

By the time of Julius Caesar, about 50 BC or so, centurions were reputed for their loyalty and efficiency. Normally centurions rose through the enlisted ranks to their office, typically after fifteen or more years of service. The rank of centurion was highly desired by common soldiers, and there were several grades within the rank of centurion. The highest grade was called primipilaris, which paid more than 15 times the salary of a foot soldier, and a long-serving centurion could look forward to a pension at the end of his service.

The centurion was somewhat of a cross between today's master sergeant and captain, and had responsibilities for training and disciplining the men under his command. Typically centurions had seen service in many parts of the empire, and could be given responsibility for assignments like building projects, discipline in mines and quarries, collecting taxes, and adjudicating boundary disputes. In the gospels we sometimes see centurions in charge of security patrols or execution squads.

In Luke's writings, the Gospel of Luke and the Book of Acts, centurions are portrayed very positively, as in today's reading. We considered another important example just a few weeks ago when we briefly considered the account in Acts of the centurion Cornelius, who was converted to Christianity along with his entire household after hearing Peter preach the gospel. There are other places in the Book of Acts where centurions are portrayed in very positive terms. In fact, one clear theme in Luke's writings is that Christianity is not opposed to the Roman Empire, not subversive or revolutionary in any way.

It helps as always to set this reading from chapter seven in its context. It follows what has come to be known as "The Sermon on the Plain" which follows some of the very same themes as the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew. In chapter six we find Luke's

version of the Beatitudes, a list of blessings and woes for certain classes of people. We find instructions to love enemies and to refrain from judging others. A familiar lesson about how good trees bear good fruit, while bad trees bear bad fruit. And a reminder that those who listen and heed his teachings will be able to withstand the storms that we encounter in life.

The healing of the centurion's slave begins an extended theme demonstrating the power that Jesus possesses as a result of his relationship with God, and especially how that power bears on the approaching judgment and redemption of the entire world. The story that follows in chapter seven deals with Jesus raising to life the dead son of a widow as he is being carried to the cemetery in the neighboring town of Nain. The narratives of the centurion's slave and the widow's son have a number of parallels. Luke often places stories with the same theme right next to each other.

In our reading for today, Jesus enters the town of Capernaum after delivering "The Sermon on the Plain." Capernaum was and is a town built on the northern shore of the Sea of Galilee, which is, of course a freshwater lake fed by snowmelt from nearby Mount Hermon. In Capernaum there is a centurion with a slave "whom he values highly" and who is very ill, close to death. A number of commentators on this passage think the slave is highly valued not so much for his economic value to the centurion, but because the centurion cares for this slave on a personal level.

Remember that slavery in the Roman Empire was entirely different from the chattel slavery which was practiced in the west, and in the US until the Civil War. Slaves in the empire were not normally mistreated and often became as members of the family. Furthermore, in many cases slaves of that time valued their positions in wealthy households and saw those positions as their means of providing economic security for themselves and their households. So it is entirely possible that the centurion in today's story held his slave in high regard as a friend, and perhaps something like a son.

The centurion sends a delegation of Jewish elders to Jesus, through whom the centurion asks Jesus to come and heal his slave. The Greek word used for the elders is "presbuteros" of course, from which comes the name of the Presbyterian Church: a church whose health and well-being is the responsibilities of elders. We will see why the centurion sends this delegation of Jewish elders, rather than going himself, in a moment.

The elders make an urgent appeal to Jesus, noting that the centurion is worthy of having his slave healed, because he loves the Jewish people and even built the synagogue for them. These hints lead us to believe that the centurion is among the so-called "fearers of God" of that time. These God-fearers were Gentiles who had become captivated by the religion of the Jews and the God whom they worshiped. God-fearers would become involved in the religion of the Jews as far as the restrictions of the religion would allow, but would not take the step of becoming circumcised. Without circumcision they could not become full members of the Jewish community.

You can visit the ruins of a synagogue in Capernaum today. Nancy and I have been there, and I know some of you have, as well. The archaeological evidence indicates that the ruins date later than the first century AD, but there is some conjecture that the newer synagogue was built on the same site as the one mentioned in Luke 7.

It is somewhat surprising that the centurion has the means to finance a synagogue, but certainly not impossible. A centurion most certainly could invest his earnings and even run a business, if his deployment gave him some degree of stability in a particular place.

So this particular centurion has become a valued part of the Jewish community in Capernaum, even if he is not a full member.

Jesus responds to the request of the centurion by following the delegation of Jewish elders towards the home of the centurion. But before they get there the soldier sends another delegation, this time consisting of his friends.

The second delegation has a remarkable message to deliver. Through them the centurion says to Jesus, “Lord, do not trouble yourself, for I am not worthy even to have you come inside my home. That’s why I didn’t presume to come ask you for help myself. But if you will only say the word, my servant will be healed. For, you see, I am a man who understands authority. I have authority set over me, and I have authority over the soldiers under me. I can tell one to go, and he goes. I can tell another to come, and he comes. I can say to my slave, do this, and he does it. I understand authority.

“

This is an amazing statement from a Gentile, even a God-fearing Gentile. Somehow, in some way, this centurion knows that Jesus has authority over illness, even very serious illness. Earlier in Luke’s gospel Jesus has cast a demon out of a man in the town of Capernaum. Perhaps the centurion actually witnessed this event, or perhaps he heard about it from others. It would surely have been the talk of the town. Luke records that many in the town of Capernaum come who were sick with all kinds of diseases, and Jesus lays his hands on them and makes them well. Jesus also casts out demons, who, according to Luke, identify him as the Son of God.

There is also recorded in earlier chapters of Luke, Jesus healing a man with leprosy, and man who is paralyzed, and a man with a withered hand. And before he delivers the Sermon on the Plain, he continues his healing ministry with the crowd gathered there.

It is very likely that these things have been relayed to the centurion, and especially the miracles that Jesus has performed in his own town, if he did not witness them himself.

So, he says in effect to Jesus, I know that you have authority over diseases and demons. I know that you have the authority of God. There is no need for you to come to my house. I am not worthy even for you to come through my door. Simply say the word, and my slave will be healed. For, you see, I understand how authority works.

This centurion isn't acting like a centurion. Soldiers of his rank would not typically demonstrate the humility that he does. But if Jesus has authority over demons and diseases, then this God-fearer recognizes that Jesus has authority over him as well.

Jesus says to those around him, "I tell you, not even among the people of Israel have I found such faith." And when the delegation of friends returns to the centurion's house, the slave is found to be in good health.

We begin to see the theme which runs throughout Luke and Acts, that the Gentiles are no longer excluded from the people of God, but indeed are joyfully welcomed into the new kingdom which Jesus brings with him. This Gentile, this centurion, receives the blessings of God because he simply asks, demonstrating his trust that Jesus can do what he asks.

We may pray that the trust of the centurion could be ours, as well.