

ONLY SPEAK THE WORD

1 Kings 8. 22-23, 41-43

Galatians 1. 1-12

Luke 7. 1-10

I speak to you in the name † of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.
Amen.

Today's gospel reading is a lesson in faith. We might even say that it is a lesson in *amazing faith*. Only twice in the gospels is our Lord said to be amazed: on this occasion in Luke 7, it is a Gentile who provokes such a response; and Jesus says to his followers, 'I tell you, not even in Israel have I found such faith.' On the other occasion (recorded in chapter 6 of St Mark's gospel), Christ is rejected by his fellow Jews in his hometown of Nazareth; and it is said that he was amazed by their lack of faith. What could be more dreadful than to amaze the Son of God with one's lack of faith? And conversely, what could be more wonderful than to amaze him with one's faith? Today we should be asking ourselves, 'What was it about this man's faith that made it so amazing?'

We can try to understand this by looking at the man himself. To begin with, he was a centurion in the Roman army. That in itself was not particularly special, as there were lots of centurions in the civilized world and beyond. They were equivalent in rank to a modern-day army captain and normally had command of 100 soldiers. This man was living in an occupied land, where the tensions between the occupying forces and the indigenous people were fragile, to say the least. But he was known and respected by the locals, and the Jewish elders were even prepared to plead on his behalf when he was in difficulty; so clearly his reputation for decency and integrity had crossed both ethnic and cultural boundaries.

Significantly, in his own household the centurion demonstrated love and care for others. Slaves in Roman society had no status whatever, and when they were no

longer useful, they were generally disposed of; but this one was dear to the centurion and was valued highly. Once again, we see the centurion's kindness crossing traditional barriers, and to help this slave he was not afraid to risk compromising his position by appealing to his Jewish neighbours for help. Clearly our centurion, whose name we still do not know, was quite an exceptional man.

The elders, as they vouched for this Roman before Jesus, described him as one 'who loves our people, and it is he who built our synagogue for us.' Gentiles were barred from the Temple in Jerusalem, but were allowed to attend the synagogues and to listen to the word of God being taught. It seems remarkable to us that a Roman soldier should use his money, his reputation and his influence to build a synagogue; but clearly the man recognised that this was a good way to participate in God's work. He wanted to be actively involved. Yes, our centurion was an exceptional man.

And if we are impressed by this man's love for others, we must also recognise his humility. He was a man of some influence and power in society, yet he regarded himself as underserving of our Lord's personal attention. He understood the local customs and did not want to put Jesus in the difficult position of having to enter the house of a Gentile. Equally, he did not want to accost him in the street and possibly cause embarrassment, so he asked his friends to act as intermediaries. His words are particularly moving: 'Lord, do not trouble yourself, for I am not worthy to have you come under my roof; therefore I did not presume to come to you.' He did not say, 'I am a Gentile and it would be inappropriate for you to visit my house'; he said, 'I am not worthy.' Our centurion was a man of exceptional sensibilities.

On top of all this, the man had absolute faith in Jesus. The centurion knew that Christ could heal the slave with just a word. As a member of the great Roman Empire, he understood the structures of authority. He had soldiers and slaves under

him who obeyed without question; and he understood that authority brought with it responsibility. Hence his concern for his slave.

The centurion also understood that with authority comes power, the power of life and death; and he had probably exercised that power himself. But with ordinary mortals, it is a somewhat limited power. One can bring about the death of another person, but one cannot bring about new life. That is something that only God can do. The centurion recognised that someone who could heal with a word must be God, and he had no doubt whatsoever that our Lord could restore his slave to health.

It is interesting also to note that the centurion did not attempt to bargain with Jesus: 'If you will do this for me, I shall do such and such for you.' He simply asked for this gift, knowing that Christ could do it and believing that he would do it out of sheer kindness. Small wonder then that our Lord was amazed to find such faith, especially in a Gentile, and especially in a pagan Roman soldier!

All of this leads us to ask ourselves, 'What is faith?' Probably the number of books written on that subject, piled on top of one another, would reach at least as high as the Tower of Babel! Allow me to share just three thoughts, then, which arise from this story of the Roman centurion's encounter with Jesus.

Firstly, faith is not just believing that God *can*; it is knowing that he *will*. We do not have to buy God's favour, and we do not need to bargain for it. He is generous beyond our imagination, and loves us as his own children.

Secondly, faith means being prepared to *trust where we are not permitted to see*. Whatever problems, difficulties or situations we may face, we can know that God has our welfare at heart and, to use the words of the Lady Julian of Norwich, 'all shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of thing shall be well'. We do not need

necessarily to understand the precise mechanisms of how God will work. The truth is that he will.

And thirdly, faith allows God to do *for us*, and to do *with us*, what we could never do alone. I have in my mind the image of a small child hoisted by his father onto his shoulders so he can see over the crowd and watch the pageant or the match or whatever. The child has no fear, because he knows he is completely safe in his father's hands; and the result is something he could not achieve on his own.

So it is with all of us. There is an innocent quality about such faith, almost child-like, that reminds me of something else which our Lord said: 'Unless you change and become like little children, you shall never enter the kingdom of Heaven' (Mt 18. 4). May our faith – yours and mine – reflect such a beautiful, simple trust in God.

Amen.