

## **Luke 7 – The faith of the Centurion**

Was Jesus powerful? Did he need to be powerful, in order to do all the stuff he did! Did he need to exert power? Did he have to be a powerful person, in order to do the powerful acts we read about in the Gospels. And if he did have to be powerful – what did his power consist in?

For many people, knowledge is power. And if Jesus was the Word, instrumental in laying the foundations of the universe, then he probably knew quite a lot.

And yet, for someone who was apparently “omniscient”, Jesus spent a lot of time being amazed! He was amazed by the Centurion in today’s reading – which, as the Son of God – is quite surprising isn’t it. Since Jesus was the second person of the Trinity, wandering around ancient Palestine, surely – he must have known everything! As the Greek philosophers taught – if God is God, then he is Omniscient – he knows everything... If that were true, how boring would this Jesus have been!

If Jesus really is God, then he is not floating around Palestine, reading everyone’s thought and faking surprise when he found something he liked! Jesus spent a lot of time being amazed at people – and if Jesus embodies something of God’s own personality – then doesn’t that speak something of who God really is?

Not a one-man super-power, but one who knows what it really means to engage with people! That, after all, lies at the heart of the doctrine of the Trinity – that God is relationship. And here he is, in the person of Jesus, wandering around Palestine, showing his amazement at people. It was not always positive, as in this reading about the faith of the centurion. Sometimes it was really quite negative – particularly about the lack of faith in his own people and even his own disciples.

But I think, the amazement of Jesus alone speaks volumes about who he is... It says he is curious about people. Not in some Daily Sport Hello Magazine let’s expose the hypocrisy of the religious leaders kind of way. But curiosity in the sense that he genuinely wants to get to what makes people tick.

This desire to encounter people, fully – I wonder, if that is where his power really lies. And I don’t mean that in some tree-hugging damp-eyed content-less way – because today’s reading shows Jesus exercising authority from a distance to heal the Centurion’s servant.

Now – if there was anyone in Israel that actually embodied power, it was a centurion. The Romans were the occupying force. The greatest military machine the world had ever seen – a highly trained, highly organised, highly efficient and ruthless army. Every one of its soldiers embodied that power. But a Centurion! A centurion was an officer with charge over about 80 soldiers. The soldiers themselves looked up to the centurion – the combat veteran, able to read, able to lead, able to encourage and organise and fight and inspire. For Romans and Jews alike, for better or worse – the Centurion embodies power!

And yet, right here, we have this exchange in which the Centurion recognises the authority of this powerless carpenter wandering through the country side with his pathetic bunch of followers. It’s no accident that this story comes immediately after Jesus has been asking some of his followers, “Why do you call me Lord, Lord, and do not do what I say? The faith

of the this horrible, yucky, gentile power figure, comes immediately after Jesus has warned his own people that it is dangerous to say “Oh Yes, Jesus is this great power figure,” without actually doing what he says.

The Centurion, on the other hand, understands completely what Jesus is able to do, and in a simple, straightforward way – entrusts himself to that. But, when you look at the story that way – wasn’t the centurion just treating Jesus as a servant! He doesn’t even go to Jesus himself – he sends others to speak on his behalf: You say the word, and My servant will be healed. Job done. The most effective way to get the servant healed.

Was that why Jesus thought the centurion showed faith? That the centurion believed Jesus could do the impossible?

Look at the story again! This Gentile Centurion is someone who loves the Jewish nation, and has built a synagogue. And who does he send to speak to Jesus – he sends Jewish elders, who speak enthusiastically on his behalf! This is a man who has already shown the extent to which he embraces otherness. This is a convert to the Jewish faith – Jews were exceptional in the ancient world because they were exempted from military service – so this is a Jewish convert who comes to the Jewish faith with a kind of clean sheet.

And yet, by sending for help from Jesus, this Centurion betrays something else. Because if, after 2000 years, a bunch of foreigners are sat in a church listening to the story, you can be pretty sure the Centurion’s own soldiers will have heard the story. And by doing what he is doing, it is more of a subversion of Roman convention than any of the powerful acts that Jesus did. With all the power, authority and might at the Centurion’s disposal, he goes to a Jewish peasant for help.

And he doesn’t just go to a Jewish peasant for help. He places his enormous Roman authority, below that of a Jewish peasant. Because, he recognises that this Jewish peasant embodies something infinitely more powerful.

Wouldn’t you love to know the life this soldier had afterwards. What did his men say about him? What did his superior officers say about him? What part did he or his soldiers play in the death of Jesus? Remembering that, although in a different region, there were only a couple of thousand soldiers spread throughout the entire region. And Jesus says that nowhere in that region, nowhere in Israel, has he witnessed this level of faith.

The faith of the centurion was not that he believed Jesus had authority over nature so he could therefore, by logical deduction, cure his own servant. The faith of the centurion was his readiness to risk whatever power he himself had attained, demoting it, relegating it, placing the only kind of power that most people understood, beneath the power of Jesus.

I had a debate here, last year, with some former bishop – about how Christians engage with poverty. And his argument was that we ought to strive to get Christians in power, because once you have Christians in power, you can then influence the world for good. Fine words from a bishop – and a lord. But I wonder what the Centurion would have said about that!

The bishop said that, if someone in power – a high ranking banker for instance – came to watch and listen to all we did at Bloomsbury – he would be deeply affected, but would still have to go back into the world of finance and exercise his power for the force of goodness.

Well – that seems to be precisely the response Jesus was familiar with – “why do you call me Lord, Lord, and do not the things that I say.” Why do you come and see and hear and experience this stuff, express your admiration, and then allow it to have no impact on your life?

My argument would be that the successful high-ranking banker – is, for that very reason, before he comes here, restricted in his ability to see and hear and experience. He is deeply invested in a system, a way of life, that makes it impossible to listen and hear and grasp certain things. And I’m not just picking on bankers – we are all invested in commitments, for better or worse, which prevent us from hearing.

And the point of the Centurion’s faith is this. That though he was as invested as it was possible to be, in the machinations of the most unjust and hated system imaginable at the time, somehow – he was still able to hear and see and experience Jesus properly – to the extent that he recognised the authority of Jesus – and risked losing his own power as a result.

And it is precisely that ability to relinquish power, that expresses the kind of power we see exercised by Jesus. The greatest among you must become the least, the first will be last and the last first, whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted.

Power that healed his servant – and accidentally won him the long-lasting fame that Roman warriors associated with power and greatness.

Power is not a pre-requisite for faithfulness in the Christian life. If anything, it is likely to have the opposite effect. What power there is in the Christian faith is to be found in relinquishing power – and here we do that at communion.

Here, there can be no power games – one loaf and one cup. Not a privileged banquet, with the poorer members gathering scraps from the table. This is a place where, out of our poverty or our riches – we bring what we are. With our power and our helplessness, we all drink one cup and all eat one loaf.

Here all power is nailed to the cross, all quest for power is sacrificed – to make room for who God is. And whatever happens in our lives as a result ... is likely to be the kind of mighty act we see Jesus performing.