

St Botolph's Church Worthing
Trinity Sunday 29 May 2016
Luke 7: 1-10
Father Roger Walker

St Luke describes Jesus' earthly ministry as one of teaching and healing, and clearly Jesus had become well known as a healer, because even a Roman centurion turned to him when a highly valued slave became ill. True, this centurion was rather different from the majority of the Roman army, for he sent Jewish elders to intercede with Jesus for him and they described him as 'one who loves our nation and who has built them a synagogue'. So it sounds as if he had come to faith in the one God, but I am sure he regarded Jesus only as a gifted healer: certainly not as the Son of God. Yet clearly he saw that Jesus was different from other wandering preachers and healers.

Remember that the Romans considered themselves masters of the world, and all other nationalities to be inferior. So for an officer in the Roman Army to say of Jesus 'I do not deserve to have you come under my roof', and 'I did not consider myself worthy to come to you' is quite remarkable. For that officer to describe Jesus as being like himself – able to give commands and have them obeyed – shows spiritual insight. But his greatest spiritual insight comes when he describes himself, and by implication Jesus, as a man under authority. He obeys his senior officers in the army and he understands that Jesus is not acting on his own, but obeys God. Of course, Jesus shows his power and his father's power by healing the centurion's slave from a distance and acknowledges the centurion's faith and trust in him.

With this healing miracle St Luke in his narrative is edging towards a revelation that Jesus is the son of God. Looking back, this would have been quite apparent but at this time his disciples and those around him would not have recognised what was happening, but next week we shall hear of another miracle that makes quite clear to those who have eyes to see exactly who Jesus is – so much for the next instalment!

This has been a touching story recounted by St Luke – but is there any way in which it has a message for us, beyond telling us that Jesus' healing power came from the divine nature which he shared with his father. Perhaps the first thing that strikes us is the humility of the centurion. He had every reason to consider himself important and superior but he does not push himself forward and is not demanding of Jesus. We can learn from this because so often – especially nowadays – we are very concerned that we get our rights and this can make us both selfish and self-centred: two things that God abhors with his desire for us to love our neighbours as ourselves.

Part of the centurion's humble words to Jesus were ones that are very familiar to us: 'I do not consider myself worthy to come to you', 'but only say the word and I shall be healed'. For each Sunday we respond to the invitation to Communion by saying 'only say the word and I shall be healed'. We get the humility in the first part about not being worthy to receive Jesus, but how about 'I shall be healed'. We may not be ill!

We can understand it as being healed from the effects of our sins but if we look at the Biblical word for 'healed', it is *sodso* – which means both to heal and to save. What we want as we come to receive the body and blood of Christ in Holy Communion is to be saved: to be delivered from the power of sin and death.

So, from the centurion's words so far we can see for ourselves both a Christian virtue; humility, and our greatest desire, to be saved. But he has not finished yet and declares himself to be 'a man under authority having soldiers under me', and we are certainly people under authority – the authority of God who should govern and rule our lives. Here we must ask ourselves, 'am I obedient to this authority? Do I go when he says go, and come when he says come?' We all know that our obedience to God is patchy at best and these words should encourage us to be more obedient servants to him.

But what about 'having soldiers under me'? Some of us do have authority over other people in family or work situations and we can be sure that a centurion as admired as this one, was always fair in his dealings with those under him. So we are to be obedient to God, and kind and fair to those who look to us for leadership. So we can stack up here:

- Humility
- Salvation
- Obedience
- Fairness

Rather a strange mix, but each of them important to our daily lives as Christians and they all come from the faith that we have in Jesus. Perhaps we should ask ourselves in conclusion, 'will Jesus be as amazed at our faith as he was at the centurion's?' I hope he will be – but I suspect that we have some work to do on it first!

AMEN

Father Roger Walker

29.5.16