

HEALING OF THE CENTURION'S SLAVE

The power, authority and reach of Jesus' healing word

Luke 7.1-10

Introduction

We are in election mode. So one of the things in people's minds is health. When we become older healthcare becomes a consideration for where we live and how we live. We see remote indigenous communities ravaged by diseases like rheumatic fever so that many people die long before they need to.

It was much the same in the ancient world. Galilean peasants had little or no access to the burgeoning and expensive health care industry of the Roman Empire. They might live to 40 and every day beyond was a blessing but often blighted by eye and skin diseases, damaged or missing limbs and a whole lot more.

People like our centurion probably had some access to the expensive sort of Roman medicine if it was available in Capernaum but most people attended healing centres where healers applied their trade with herbs and rituals at a much more affordable rate.

One recommendation from such a centre reads,

“Because the help of human physicians had failed, the sick came to the god for whom the impossible is possible.”

We will find such sentiments in the Gospels.

The context

In the story as Luke tells it Jesus called his disciples (6.12-16) after a night of prayer. He then descends the mountain and finds a great crowd of people waiting to find healing, release from demonic powers and hear the word of God. In Luke that is known as the sermon on the plain (6.17-49). Luke comments that power came from him in all his activities.

Now Jesus returns to Capernaum and into this market and commercial town he comes with the reputation as a man of powerful teaching and healing.

In the sermon on the plain Jesus spoke a prophetic word to his listeners. And the core of that prophetic word is that God's gracious activity is directed towards the sinful and despised, the marginal and outsider.

The sermon is the beginning of the exposition of the programmatic 4.16-30

“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring Good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.”

So the sermon begins with (6.20),

“Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God.”

He also emphasised loving enemies basing such a life on God's character; a God who is kind to the ungrateful and wicked.

What will he do next? It is a 'Is he serious?' moment as are all the stories in Luke 7. OK, fine words just what you would expect a prophet to say, but let's wait and see. Let's see how this prophet reveals himself. Will his prophetic action match his prophetic word?

And what they are looking for is the principal issue raised by the sermon: If love is to be extended to enemies, are there any functional perimeters for the reach of Jesus' gracious ministry?

And then the centurion comes on the scene.

Scene 1 The strange centurion

Luke poses the story as a simple healing.

A valued slave is ill to the point of dying in this centurion's household and he cares for his slave. So the centurion seeks Jesus' help through the mediation of local Jewish synagogue leaders.

It is clear that this middle ranking officer, a gentile, does not despise the Jewish leadership as might be customary but loves and respects

them even to the point of paying for the building of a local synagogue. It was unusual.

Like Cornelius in Acts 10 he looks in at Judaism and likes what he sees and opens himself up to learning new truths from this strange, ancient way of life. He approaches this way with respect and humility. By any standards he is a good man.

So Jesus sets off with the emissaries.

Scene 2 The even stranger request

On approach to the house a group of the centurion's friends meet him on the way.

“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. But only speak the word, and let my servant be healed.”

Let's just sit with this for a moment. This is a centurion speaking to a Jewish teacher/prophet/healer. Remember that the Jewish leaders have commended him as worthy. Their word for worthy is 'We have put him in a balance and by our standards he is worthy.' It is something like, 'He is just like one of us on the more generous side.'

The centurion uses a different idea when he speaks of worthy: 'I am not adequate, nor sufficient nor capable in your presence.' The Jewish leaders have weighed him by accepted standards. He weighs

himself by the presence of Jesus. That is a different standard altogether. He sees something in Jesus that breaks the expected standards of a being a Jewish, prophet/teacher/healer.

He expects something like the creative word of Genesis to come from Jesus' lips: Only speak the word.... No-one has yet made such a connection, not even John. The word that brings creation into being is here. No wonder he is overawed.

Then more surprisingly he continues:

“For I also am a man set under authority, with soldiers under me; and I say to one, ‘Go,’ and he goes, and to another, ‘Come,’ and he come, and to my slave, ‘Do this,’ and the slave does it.”

The man understands the nature of authority through military rank and social status. He understands that the one who speaks the creative word is way out of his league.

Scene 3 Jesus caught by surprise

He catches Jesus by surprise, more than surprise. He is amazed just like people are sometimes amazed at him. In fact this usually what happens; Jesus catches people off guard. This soldier catches Jesus off guard and literally stops him in his tracks.

He trusts that Jesus is the bearer of the creative word that made the world and will restore it. He somehow 'gets it' that Jesus has that sort of authority; the authority to create and renew.

Somehow, for all his lack of appropriate religious background, teaching and practice he has grasped the core of Jewish faith; the God of Israel is one true God who creates heaven and earth and who rules it in his sovereignty.

Then he has gasped this shocking new form of that faith; this one true God is present and active in Jesus the prophet from Nazareth.

We have no idea how he arrived at this point and that matters little.

What matters is that he trusted it and acted on it. He trusted Jesus.

And it is this that Jesus calls faith. He trusts Jesus and acts on it. He trusts the creative word of Jesus. He does not sign up to dogma or to a denomination. Whatever these are they are not faith, a common media error.

He trusted Jesus based on two truths; the God of Israel creates and recreates, governing his world to that end, and that God now acts in Jesus.

Scene 4 Re-creation

So God acts in Jesus. The servant is healed. And here is the pattern of salvation for all those who will come to faith from outside God's ancient people. They will share in the blessing healing and salvation.

On the other hand, those who already know, the ancient people of God, Jesus puts on notice. One day Jewish elders in another place will take another view on Jesus, rejecting the link between the Lord of Israel and Jesus.

We hear the echoes of another prophet mentioned in Luke and speaking of Jesus;

“...a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel.” (Simeon Luke 2.32 ...)

And we hear even more ancient echoes in the story of Naaman the leper and Elisha the prophet (2Kings 5.1-14). God's eye has always been on those outside Israel.

We read of it in Ps 96 today. Specifically we read that

“...he is coming to judge the earth.

He will judge the world with righteousness, and the peoples with his truth.”

Now we know how that happens. The truth God rules as creator and re-creator, the giver of life and in trusting that we find life. This is not

a rules based game. It is about relationships put in the right. And the right relationship to God is illustrated beautifully in the story.

Concluding reflections

For those of us in the know this is a tale of great warning. It ought to ring all kinds of alarm bells. The unfaithfulness of the people of God is an occupational hazard that haunts us every day. This man's trust, "Only speak the word, and let my servant be healed" is the daily challenge.

Human divisions of race, culture, status, gender and any others we will think up have no bearing on the matter of faith as far as God is concerned. Faith is trusting that the creative power of God is at work in Jesus. Social divisions crumble before it and dissolve.

This story illustrates Jesus willingness to bring salvation to this Gentile's slave. And it answers the question, How far will Jesus go? In this story Jesus refuses to draw insider/outsider lines in the face of Gentile defilement (and possible corpse impurity).

The Lord we worship is mighty in creative word, responsive to our needs, and compassionate to heal.