

March 15, 2020 Portraits: Pt. 2 Jesus: The Man With Authority

The Gospels are filled with stories of Jesus interaction with people. He became involved in the lives of fishermen, and HE changed their lives forever. The chief evidence of that is that we are still talking about them, and Jesus effect on them centuries later! Our 2nd story presents us with another portrait of Jesus. Here Luke tells us a singular thing about our Saviour. Jesus had authority.

Interestingly, we say the Christian Faith sprang out of the soil and waters of Judean tradition and religion. There are more pages in the Old Testament, more books, more chapters and verses, than there are in the New Testament. And all those Old Testament writings, from Genesis to Malachi represent the bulk of the sacred writings of Judaism. Preachers like myself are at pains to demonstrate that Jesus life unfolded in accordance with claims made by the Prophets concerning the Messiah. It is in Isaiah 53 that we first hear in the Bible that “the Lord laid on HIM the iniquity of us all,” the heart of the Gospel message and Christian truth.

And yet, that said, that recognized, the key player in the story Luke tells us in chapter 7 of his account is a man who is not even Jewish. He is a Gentile. Not only that: he is a Gentile who is an officer in the armies of Rome which occupy the conquered country of Israel. There was this centurion. When Jesus entered Capernaum one of the first things that

happened was that HE received a delegation, elders from the local Synagogue, who had come to plead on behalf of this Roman officer. The centurion had a servant, and the servant was sick. And the sickness was serious. The servant was dying. It is apparent that this servant meant a lot to the Roman officer. The NIV translates the description as a valued servant. A man who did more than just what the job required? The KJV (and you know my bias...best word for word translation into Elizabethan English... says this servant was dear to the centurion. Yes, more than just an employee, more than just a slave, someone the centurion regarded as a friend, someone beyond the chain of command, to whom the centurion could talk, a man with whom the centurion could be open, a servant who watched his back, who cared about him like a brother, or perhaps a father, family.

But there was more to this centurion than the fact that he valued, cared about, was friends with, a slave who served him as a house manager, a valet, a confidant, a cook, a butler. The elders from the local synagogue were willing to represent him to Jesus for very personal reasons. They talked to the centurion and knew him well enough, that he had asked for their help. The centurion was so concerned he asked them to ask for the help of Jesus. What he wanted was the healing of his servant's illness. And that they were willing to do so, says very simply, this was no ordinary centurion. Jewish elders of the local synagogue regarded him as a friend, as a man deserving of the answer to his request. I have stood inside the ruins of that synagogue. As the story is relayed to Jesus by the

leaders of the synagogue in Capernaum, this centurion loves Israel. He built the synagogue. That probably means he paid for it's construction. And Jesus was sufficiently impressed that HE went with them, walking to the house where the centurion was lodged and the sick servant lay.

These details are singular. We know from the byplay between Pontius Pilate and the chief priests of Jerusalem that they were not friends. They found it hard to be in one another's company. Yet this centurion has managed to earn trust, respect, and loyalty from the Jewish elders! It becomes clear that the centurion was what the New Testament calls a "God fearing man." He has probably not been circumcised...he is not a Jew...but he is more than a little interested in their religious teaching, especially when it comes to their understanding of morality. We have walked the path this centurion walked. We love the stories of Moses and Gideon and Joshua who fought the battle of Jericho, whose God brought down the walls of that fortified city. He almost understands their radical allegiance to the God who made the world and all that is in it, and has saved them from numerous disasters. The God who cares.
The God who saves.

The surprise in the story that Luke tells us, is this. They are just about there, near the house in which the centurion lives when they are met by a second delegation. They are friends of his. Soldiers? Perhaps. Neighbours? More likely. They come bearing a message. "Lord." That is not a

name to be used lightly in Judea. But the message is even more incredible. “Lord, do not trouble yourself, for I do not deserve to have you come under my roof. That is why I did not even consider myself worthy to come to you.” This is Roman officer serving in an occupying army, under the ultimate command of Pilate, the Procurator of Judea. He gives orders. He does not have to beg. We are dealing with a very sensitive man. An officer and a gentleman. He knows a rabbi would be seen as ritually unclean if he entered the house of a Gentile. And he has not just recognized that reality, he has prevented it from happening.

Words are important. When it comes to Judeo-Christian tradition words are extremely important. “Lord. I do not deserve to have you come into my home. I did not consider myself worthy to come to you face to face. But say the word, and my servant will be healed.” You know, you could say the centurion has submitted to Jesus authority. I am not saying that because it would be treason on the part of the centurion. He could be stripped of his command, and even killed were it true.

And remember in the midst of all this, the teller of the story is Luke the physician, a healer recognized as such by his own people. You could not invent this if you wanted to, but here are the details as Luke lays them out for us. And no one ever said, ever wrote, ever argued....this did not happen. It was not challenged when Luke’s account began to circulate.

The centurion through his “friends” sends this message to Jesus. “I myself am a man under authority, with soldiers under me. I tell this one, “Go! And he goes.” I tell that one, “Come.” And he comes. I say to my servant, “Do this and he does it.” I understand how authority works. And I understand that you have authority. Say the word, standing out there in the street, several doors away. Say the word, and my servant will be healed.”

If you have ever wondered who knew that Jesus healed the sick or if that ever happened at all...get this... in the Galilee region word has spread. What Jesus did in other towns has been heard about in Capernaum and not just by the in-crowd of the Jewish community. This centurion has heard about Jesus. He has heard about miracles. He has heard enough, and confirmed enough that when his friend, his dear friend who is a long time serving servant-slave falls deathly ill, he does not send for Roman first aiders, or Luke the physician (another Jew) he sends Jewish friends to seek the help of the Lord...that is how he addressed Jesus through them...Lord. “Say the word, and my servant will be healed. I know how authority works. And I know you are a man under authority, I do not possess.” That is what the words mean. They are a statement of faith. I believe that if you say the word, my servant will be healed.

And that is not just my interpretation of what was said, it was Jesus understanding of what had been said. “When Jesus heard this, he was amazed at the centurion, and

turning to the crowd following him (did you get that? A crowd has followed Jesus and the elders of the synagogue because they wanted to see what was going to happen when they got to the home of the centurion where there is a servant who is sick and dying. And what Jesus said to the crowd (not the Jewish elders, to the crowd) “I tell you, I have not found such great faith even in Israel.....”

The men who had been sent to intercept our Lord, Jesus, so that he would not enter the house of a Gentile, returned to the house....and they found the servant well.

This portrait is a picture of Jesus, who was crucified on the hill called Calvary in Aramaic, Golgotha in Hebrew, was dead and buried, and HE rose on the 3rd day...a Sunday morning. The defining image in this portrait is ONE who has authority. He teaches crowds of people and individuals and they catch a taste of the presence of Heaven. God is real to them. Mercy is an experience. Forgiveness is a gift received.

On a Friday afternoon, Jesus died between two thieves. Matthew tells us that as the storm broke and the earth quaked, another centurion and the soldiers with him, standing guard, were terrified and they exclaimed, “Surely he was the Son of God!” (Matthew 27:54)

Let us pray;

Lord we bow before you, a man in whom the fullness of the authority of God was on display in the world. Tell us to

go, and we will go. Tell us to come and we will come. Say the word, and we will do it. May our faith in you be as rich in evidence as was the faith of that centurion. You are the true light come into our world to save. Receive our praise. Amen