

## Saturday March 20<sup>th</sup>: The Centurion: [Matthew 8:5-13](#):

### Go! 'Let it be done just as you believed it would'

In the main entrance of the Grosvenor Museum in Chester there is a life size model of a Roman centurion wielding his sword and looking as if he is about to strike somebody down. Centurions were battle hardened veterans responsible for training soldiers, maintaining discipline and displaying bravery and resolution on the battlefield. They had 80 men under their command and generally displayed little subtlety when it came to the aforementioned methods of training, disciplining and fighting.

*Caesarea, capital of the Roman province of Judaea*



Whilst the centurion in our passage may well have been serving under King Herod Antipas, Rome's client king in the province of Judaea, whose forces were organised in line with the Roman army, he was definitely a gentile (Jews were exempt from conscription) and represented, if at one remove, the might and power of Rome. This man was not a centurion because of who he knew or where he came from; he had been promoted because he had proved himself to be an effective soldier. Or to put it

another way, he was good at killing people in battle.

He is, then, a rather improbable character to be waylaying Jesus as he enters the town of Capernaum with an urgent plea on behalf of his ailing servant (v 6). Being in actual fact a slave, the servant would normally have been regarded as part of his property rather than a human being. The overwhelming majority of people in the centurion's situation wouldn't have cared whether the slave lived or died except for the inconvenience of having to buy another one. The world of the centurion was one of commanding and obeying without question and he himself was one cog in a chain of command which ultimately went all the way up to the Emperor of Rome (v 9). Just as he has to do exactly what he is told so those he commands must do the same. There was no room for sentiment of any kind – when you tell somebody to go, come or do this, they unhesitatingly obey (v 9b). If you were serving under the centurion in the heat of battle and he commanded you to mount an attack in which you would be likely to be killed you had no choice but to do what you were told.

Yet Jesus says that this battle-scarred veteran displays deeper faith than he has yet seen in Israel (v 10). What an extraordinary statement! Not only does he display a very personal concern for someone who he regarded as a person rather than a piece of property but he also believes in Jesus' ability to heal him. What this says to me is that in spite of the brutalising effects of commanding men who are killing and being killed by their enemies in battle the centurion had not lost touch with his own humanity.

In today's world both war and slavery continue to dehumanise many. It is not just those who fire bullets and drop bombs (often by pressing a button in a military complex thousands of miles away from the conflict zone) causing death and terrible injury but those whose homes and communities are devastated and whose loved ones are killed or maimed who face an all-out attack on their

humanity. Modern slavery takes many forms such as human trafficking, forced labour, child slavery, forced marriage and domestic slavery. Slavery has not gone away and continues to dehumanise both its victims and its perpetrators.

This comes uncomfortably close to home when we consider firstly that because of our long history of selling arms to Saudi Arabia, many of those who are suffering in the conflict in Yemen are being targeted by weapons made in the United Kingdom and secondly that modern slavery is very much present in our society; in recent years trafficked children have been found in every local area in Britain.

One of the reasons the centurion retains his humanity and can open his heart to Jesus is that he loves the people he is supposed to feel nothing for. In Luke's version of this story, he adds the detail that local leaders come to Jesus pleading the worthiness of centurion's cause because, 'he loves our nation and has built our synagogue' (Luke 7 v 5). Perhaps the real evidence of his faith is that he is able to see over the cultural, ethnic and religious barriers of his time and understand that those living, working and worshipping on the other side of these dividing lines are as important as anyone else.

Jesus uses harsh words for those who wish to restrict the love of God (v 12) because it is not just those who consider themselves children of promise who will be at the feast (v 11). Jesus' assertion that there will be outsiders present was certainly controversial and yet as the story ends with the healing of the centurion's servant, we see an indiscriminate outpouring of divine love in perfect harmony with his words.

One key aspect of Jesus's ministry was that he was able to make people who had been dehumanised feel fully human again. Those he healed of leprosy, for example, were not just restored to health but also to the circle of their families and friends ending for some of them long years of rejection and isolation as outsiders.

For the centurion, the local Judaeans were outsiders, he was not there to make friends but to enforce Roman rule. However, he had managed to form a relationship with the local people that was not that of oppressor and oppressed but based on a shared humanity. It is when we think of people as outsiders for whatever reason that we dehumanise them. At the same time, we dehumanise ourselves. God is an inclusive God and asks us to make that real in our daily lives and the lives of our churches.

It might be as simple as the outsider being somebody we don't know. When I was fifteen, I started attending a church youth group. Although my elder brothers had previously been members, I knew very few people in what was a large group of young people and felt very much on the outside of things. However, somebody called Andrew took me under his wing over a number of weeks. He had his own group of friends but would come over and talk, suggest a game of table tennis and basically check that I was ok. As time went by, I found my feet, my own group of friends and a living faith in Jesus. I cannot even recall Andrew's surname and have not met him for the best part of fifty years and yet he did three things for me. He made me feel welcome, affirmed me as a human being and helped me to find faith; I cannot thank him enough.

It's given me a particular sensitivity to the after-church coffee time on a Sunday morning (which will return, post pandemic!). If somebody is left standing on their own while members of church

chat away in their friendship groups that person will, very justifiably, feel like an outsider – a horrible feeling. The centurion went out of his way to understand and build relationships with those who were outsiders (and to whom he was very much an outsider) meaning that there are times (Sunday morning coffee being one of them) when we will need to go out of our way to include and welcome somebody new who may have come to church with a specific need. It's the kind of thing Jesus did both in this passage and throughout his ministry.

**Questions:** How might an understanding of God's love as unconditional impact our understanding of the 'good news' of Jesus? How can we live that out?

**Prayer:** Lord, help me to reach out to those who, for any reason, are outsiders and to offer them a welcome in your name. Amen.