

The Believing Centurion

A Sermon by Rev Jane Kraft given at St Michael's Sandhurst on 29 05 16

In this morning's gospel the writer Luke introduces us to a member of the occupying force which controlled the area. This man is a Centurion, a Roman soldier of standing who had authority.

The historian Polybius who lived about 150 years before Christ wrote *about the rise of Rome to world prominence*, and in his discourse set out the qualifications necessary to hold this rank in the Roman Army. He said that they must not be so much “*seekers after danger as men who can command, steady in action and reliable: they ought not to be over anxious to rush into the fight; but when hard pressed they must be ready to hold their ground and die at their posts*”

So here by an authoritative definition of the day we have a man with special qualities who holds both authority and standing in the society in which he lives. He was a man of substance, in control not only of his own life and affairs but with authority over the men in his command.

But taking into account the culture of the day this man was also unusual in his attitudes with a noteworthy sense of care and responsibility for others. He was obviously on good terms with the local community despite the fact that he was an officer in the occupying force, and had a good relationship with Jewish leaders, to the point that he had built them a place to worship in. They obviously held him in high regard for they undertook to approach Jesus on his behalf and presented his credentials as a man worthy of Jesus help. This Centurion had an understanding and respect for Jewish customs and sufficient sensitivity to appreciate that for a Jew to enter a Gentile house would cause them to become ritually unclean.

But this man's concern and compassion went beyond this public image. We are told that he cared deeply about his slave who was ill and that he held this slave "in high regard"

To fully appreciate the significance of this statement we need to remember that slaves had no rights under Roman Law: slaves were a possession and therefore to be treated not as human beings but as objects which could be thrown out when they were no longer useful. If a slave was unable to work through illness it was the established custom to cast them out to die and it was a perfectly acceptable practice to have a slave killed simply at the whim of his or her master.

So here was a man of exemplary character, considerable social standing, and greatly admired, yet compassionate and humble enough ask for help for a lowly member of his household staff, from an itinerant Jewish preacher and healer.

The Centurion's request for Jesus help was made in humility and concern for another human being. In it there is recognition of Jesus power and authority a concept which the officer in the Roman army understood.

But to concentrate solely on the admirable characteristics of the Centurion is I think to miss the point.

Fitzmyer writing about the centurion, suggests that, "*the main point in the Lucan story is not so much the worthiness of this particular Gentile, a point stressed by the elders, but rather his "faith"*"¹

¹ The Gospel according to Luke – Joseph A Fitzmyer *The Anchor Bible: Doubleday* Pg.650

The Centurion was willing to put aside his status and humbly trust Jesus power and authority to heal and save his servant and was commended for his faith.

Faith looks beyond the visible world to enduring values, and eternal realities. It is through the eyes of faith that we perceive the universe as created by God. It is faith which enables us to discern his presence and purpose working in and through our lives.

Levels of faith vary and it is so easy to let doubts overwhelm us and allow worries and fears to impede our trust in God's provision.

Faith is about the unknown and the unseen and it centres on our willingness to humbly trust God even when we can't see the way ahead and the future seems dark and the situation hopeless.

By God's grace, faith reaches out side the barriers of the world in which we live and our standing in society. It gives us the ability to look beyond the limits of our reason, to encounter God.

If we can see every step of the way we are going, then we are not walking by faith.

This week consider in the quietness of your heart where you stand

Are you willing step out of your comfort zone to take a risk for God and venture a little step in faith?