

## Learning from the Centurion of Capernaum

*A sermon preached in Christ Church, Sheridan, MT, by the Rev. Bruce McNab  
2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday after Pentecost, Proper 4, Year C. (Text: Mark 7:1-10)*

If you go to the Holy Land and visit the ruins of Capernaum on the Sea of Galilee, the town that became Jesus' home-base after leaving Nazareth, there are two interesting sites to see. First is the so-called "House of Peter," which has a strange modern shrine shaped like a flying saucer built over it. Second is the ancient synagogue of Capernaum, an imposing, Greek-style white limestone structure. The white synagogue is very old; however, it only goes back to about the year 400. But if you look at its foundations, you'll see a platform of fieldstones topped by a single course of crudely shaped, small blocks of nearly black basalt rock, the only remains of the old synagogue that stood here in the first century, the synagogue where Jesus and his friends worshiped.

Next to the white synagogue, a low wall divides the excavated part of old Capernaum from a much more extensive unexcavated area. Just across this wall you can see mounds of earth covering the ruins of a Roman bath and other mounds covering vestiges of buildings that once housed the small garrison of foreign soldiers posted in Capernaum. Their commander in the time of Jesus was a *centurion*, an officer roughly comparable to a US army captain. This Centurion paid for the original black basalt synagogue to be built (or, more likely, ordered his troops to build it). In today's gospel reading we witness this officer appealing to Jesus for a miracle. Let's examine what the gospel reveals.

It doesn't tell a lot about the Centurion of Capernaum, but there some things we can assume. He is not a Jew, and neither are his soldiers. They are foreigners, probably Greek-speaking Syrians, not Latin-speaking Italians. They are not an occupying force of Roman legionaries; the legions are up in Syria. These are lower-class frontier soldiers whose assignment is in many ways nastier than that of occupiers in the eyes of the locals. They are there to enforce the payment of taxes. We would think of them as the military "muscle" for the tax collectors, the most despised characters in any Jewish town. If you don't pay your taxes, the Centurion will send a squad of soldiers to your house to collect!

The Centurion built a synagogue for the people of Capernaum, but that alone didn't mean he revered the God of Israel. The emperor Augustus commanded his troops to build temples for the places where they were posted, regardless of which gods were being worshiped. Romans made use of the local religion to as much as they could. If a commanding officer could make the natives more cooperative by building them a temple—or a synagogue—then he should do it: Caesar's orders. It's possible the man was affected by the piety and devotion of Capernaum's Jews—*possible*, but not certain.

One thing is sure, though. The Centurion of Capernaum has heard a lot about Jesus. Today's gospel episode occurs early in Jesus' ministry, but the carpenter/prophet has already cast a demon out of a man during one Sabbath service in the black synagogue down the street and healed a man with a withered hand in the same place on another Sabbath. Early on, he also healed the mother-in-law of Simon, a well-known commercial fisherman who lives across the narrow street from the synagogue. This incident brought people from far and near to line up in the street outside Jesus' house, seeking a cure. And he healed them. Capernaum is small—maybe 1,000 people or so. Small town; word gets around. And a Centurion must know what's going on in his area.

The Centurion of Capernaum has a valuable servant whom he regards highly. This servant is dying, and so the Centurion calls in the local Jewish elders and diplomatically requests that they invite the prophet

Jesus to come heal his servant. Now, the elders were certainly in fear of the Centurion. After all, he has tremendous power, with soldiers at his disposal. And he enforces the collection of taxes! He has built their house of prayer, and they're grateful, but they also want to stay in his good graces.

Whether the town fathers are personally sympathetic to Jesus doesn't matter. Probably they aren't. Such men rarely are. Jesus seems too threatening to the status quo. But still they go to him and urge him to come and heal the Centurion's servant, offering every possible incentive they can think of. The carpenter is from Nazareth. He hasn't lived in Capernaum long; he probably doesn't know the Centurion built our synagogue. The Centurion has been generous to us, surely he cares about Israel! —Doesn't he?— They say, "Jesus, this good man *deserves* your help. He's worthy of your aid. Please come!" And Jesus, being full of love and compassion, comes along with them.

But before they have gone far, some important personal friends of the Centurion arrive—a second deputation. These men are probably gentiles, like the officer. They say something quite different to Jesus. They say, "Lord (using a very significant title of respect, NOT used by the Jewish elders), our friend the Centurion has a personal message for you. He says, 'I'm not fit for you to come under my roof, and I'm not worthy to come before you in person. [Which means: 'I know my house is unclean, and I myself am unclean to you.'] Don't trouble yourself to come to my house. Only say, "*Let the servant be healed,*" and it will be done. I know how authority works because I'm a man under authority, and I have people under my authority who obey what I command.'"

The gospel says Jesus marvels at the Centurion's message and replies, "Truly, I haven't seen faith like this even in Israel." And when the Centurion's friends get back to his quarters, his servant is well. Jesus has not even needed to speak a word of command.

All of this is fascinating, isn't it? The attention is not on the miracle, but on how the Centurion makes his request. So, what does it say to *us*? You may have your own impression, but *to me this episode tells us something about PRAYER*. In a sense the two deputations sent from the Centurion to Jesus symbolize two different ways we can offer our petitions to God. Let's break the sequence down into three stages.

The First Stage is the *foundation of prayer*. Prayer begins with recognition of the power of God, what Luke calls the "authority" of God, as well as awareness of the compassion of God. The Almighty does great and awesome things. All power in heaven and earth belong to him. The deepest needs of our hearts are properly addressed to God alone, who cares for us, his children.

The Second Stage is the *act of prayer itself*. There are different ways to pray. One way is to *remind God of how much we DESERVE his favor*. This kind of prayer says, "Dear God, I have been a good person. I'm in church most Sundays. I'm faithful to my spouse. I love my kids. I'm kind to my neighbors. I donate to the Red Cross. I think I should be granted what I ask for." This was the message contrived by the town fathers on behalf of the Centurion. The other way to pray is to *HUMBLE OURSELVES before the Lord*. This kind of prayer says, "Lord, I'm a sinner. I have no claim on you except to the extent that you choose to have mercy on one such as I. I'm not worthy, but I need your help, and I'll obey what you ask of me." This was the message in the Centurion's own words, conveyed by his own personal friends.

The Third Stage is *our attitude once we've prayed*. This, too, is evidenced by the Centurion. It is to leave the situation in the hands of God. We have surrendered our claims; we have put aside our fears. We

place ourselves and those we love in the hands of the Lord, and we wait on the working of his providence, trusting in his love.

What more can I say?

*Please kneel, and pray with me:*

Jesus, Master and Lord. Forgive our sins of pride. All we have comes from the Father's bounty. We bow before you, acknowledging your mercy and confessing our own needs. Our hearts are burdened in various ways. Some of us are sick and suffering. Others are fearful. Others are broken-hearted. Others are anxious for the well-being of our children or our friends. You know our needs before we ask and our ignorance in asking. Help us, Lord, we pray. And lift us up to walk before you with the faith of the Centurion of Capernaum. Amen.