

Proper 4C
Luke 7.1-10
June 2 2012
St. Augustine's, Freeland
St. Stephen's, Oak Harbor

Blessed be the Name of God

Starting last winter, we Christians began our annual liturgical pilgrimage through the life of Jesus. Advent, the season of Mary's pregnancy and the uncertainty and joyful expectations that come at such times. Christmas and the birth of the child, Mary's child and child of God. Epiphany and the manifestations of the complexity of God's revelation in this man-child, growing into maturity. Lent and the wilderness, both for Jesus and by our participation in him, wilderness also for us. And then, beyond all imagination and all hope, Easter and the deliverance of all creation from sin and death. With the Ascension, the exile of the primordial garden is set right and the despair set loose by our first parents is gathered up into the highest of heavens, there to be made right and whole.

So we come now to the long green season, the season that will take us from now to Advent, when we will begin the Saving Narrative all over again. Through the next weeks and months, our readings will give us glimpses of the life and ministry of Jesus, glimpses of the life of the Church and the role we are to play in the ever growing, ever deepening actions and devotions to which we are continuously called. We will be

made mindful of our Lord, and we will be reminded of ourselves in his service.

We begin our green season wanderings with a story told to us by Luke. It is a story that Matthew also knows. [Mt 8.5-13] The story offers us some interesting things to talk about, quite a number in fact.

In Capernaum, Jesus is approached on behalf of a centurion whose much-valued slave has fallen ill. Hearing of Jesus' reputation, the centurion sent some elders of the people to Jesus to plead for Jesus' miraculous help. Jesus consented to help and went toward the centurion's house, where he was met by the Roman soldier who owned the sickly slave. The centurion, out of respect for Jesus' authority, spoke very humbly of himself, "Lord, do not trouble yourself, for I am not worthy to have you come under my roof..." Clearly, Jesus was amazed at the soldier's humility, amazed by his recognition of Jesus' power and authority, and amazed at his trust, his faith in Jesus' ability to heal the slave.

"I tell you," Jesus says, "not even in Israel have I found such faith." The story ends, "When those who had been sent returned to the [centurion's] house, they found the slave in good health."

That is a schematic rendition of Luke's story. Now let's return to it in some detail to explore what's there.

The first thing to notice is the unique texture of this story. There is no contest here, no debate between competing social or religious

authorities. There is no struggle between Jesus and his people, on the one hand, and the civil or religious leaders, on the other. No scribes, no Pharisees, no opponent. This is not what we are used to in these stories.

Next, we have a Roman soldier, a centurion, playing a central and very sympathetic role in the story. In terms of the social and political life of the times, the Romans were occupiers, outsiders, oppressors by definition. A centurion, the leader of a cohort of soldiers, would have personified that oppression and would have been obliged, by allegiance to his own duty, to be an overlord of the populace. From other sources, we know that it was centurions who accomplished the crucifixion of Jesus.

But here in our story, the centurion is in need, and acts, not as an overlord but rather as a petitioner. Though he has his own recognized authority, he chooses to humble himself in his approach to this itinerate healer, Jesus.

Next, we learn that the Roman soldier, doubtless a gentile, a non-Jew, in hopes of persuading Jesus to be of aid, mobilizes a group of Jewish elders, community leaders, to make his appeal. In doing so, the delegation of Jews reports to Jesus that the centurion “loves our people, and it is he who built our synagogue for us.” The delegation testifies to the goodness of this soldier. Further, unlike so many of the stories told in other places, especially the Gospel of John, there is no contest between Jesus and the delegation of Jewish leaders. And, wonderful to behold, there is also no conflict between the Jewish elders and the

Roman soldier and his cohort. Clearly, this story is not told and remembered by the Church so as to show Jesus outwitting someone, winning a battle of parables or insights. No, this story is remembered for other reasons entirely.

I want to believe that one of the reasons this story is remembered is because it shows us something different than we are used to seeing and hearing in these gospel stories. Here we see respect, cooperation and humility that we are not accustomed to seeing. We have also the remarkable generosity of Jesus in his willingness to attend to this gentile request, mediated through Jesus' own religious leaders. Jesus, the Jew, approached and petitioned by fellow Jews on behalf of a gentile soldier. This is not the stuff of which our typical stories about Jesus are made!

The story is also remembered because of the role that authority plays in the narrative. In the seventh chapter of Matthew, after Jesus finished a series of teachings, the narrator says, "Now when Jesus had finished saying these things, the crowds were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as their scribes."

[Mt. 7.28-29]

Here, in our story this morning, we have the same recognition. The soldier is quite expansive in his acknowledgement of Jesus' authority, comparing it to his own. "...I am a man set under authority," the centurion says, "with soldiers under me; and I say to one, 'Go,' and he goes, and to another, 'Come,' and he comes, and to my slave, 'Do this,'

and the slave does it.” We might argue with the soldier’s analysis of the nature of Jesus’ authority but it is absolutely clear from the story, that the centurion honored Jesus, confident in the efficacy of Jesus’ authority. “But only speak the word, and let my servant be healed.” So says the pleading soldier!

This leads us to yet another fact about this story. Over time, the words spoken by the soldier came to hold a very powerful place in the prayers of the Church. *Domine, non sum dignus*. So it began in the old language. “Lord, I am not worthy that you should enter under my roof, but only say the word and my soul shall be healed.” This is how the old formula is now rendered in our common language.

For centuries, and still today by Roman Catholics, these words had a significant role in the piety of the faithful. As is so common in the liturgy, the biblical language is changed or enriched or augmented for devotional purposes. Whereas the centurion begged for the healing of his slave, the faithful for countless centuries have pleaded for their own healing, and so it is today where this liturgical formula is used.

The language of unworthiness has a long and rich history in our liturgical practice, something that would take a good deal of time to explore but there are a few things we can say at the moment.

The unworthiness featured in the first part of the centurion’s statement captured the mind of the Church for a long while, essentially until the most recent liturgical revisions. Until recently, we seemed to

find our own unworthiness far more interesting than God's willingness to restore and heal.

We still have in Rite I a prayer that reads, "we are not worthy so much as to gather up the crumbs under thy table," and this prayer follows our confession and absolution. Presumably God's forgiveness, God's absolution would have an impact on our unworthiness but the prayer remains as it is, located right before communion.

On the other hand, in Eucharistic Prayer B in Rite II, we have the statement, "you have made us worthy to stand before you." Ironically, this language comes to us from very old sources, sources that predate our preoccupation with our own sinfulness. In this sort of way, we have begun to recapture the priority, the centrality and necessity of God's generosity.

One last thing. As genuinely rewarding as this story is, it is still true that in our story today and in others places as well, slavery and slaves have a prominent place. And here, as elsewhere in human history, slavery is slavery, the captivity of people under the ownership and domination of others. And even though in Paul's Letter to the Galatians, he reports the happy fact that after baptism "There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus." [Gal 3.28], the social facts of male domination, slavery and national and ethnic tensions remain.

What we have here with Jesus is time and place, context, a story set where it occurred, surrounded by the real world of the time. For my part, I wish that Jesus had denounced slavery and chastised slave owners to free those held in bondage, but he did not. He was a person of his own time and place, a real person in a real place, aided and beset by the social and political realities that were alive in his world. However much God tinkered with Jesus, he was still who and where he was.

As John the Evangelist says at the end of his gospel, so I must say as well. There's more we could do here but perhaps this is enough. What Luke gives us in this current story is a glimpse at some beautiful things—cooperation, mutual care and the laying aside of rivalries and their tensions. We see Jesus, confined by his worldly social circumstances, nonetheless able to accomplish the miraculous. We get a glimpse of a moment characterized by humility, respect, wonder and healing, not in some fanciful place, but in the world we live in. I think we can take encouragement from that!

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