

THE CENTURION

June 2, 2013

1 Kings 8: 22-23, 41-43

Galatians 1: 1-12

Luke 7: 1-10

In many of our readings today, we see that there is much concern with recognizing the correct source of faith, the true Lord, the right God, that people not be dissuaded by false gods, by foreign gods, by gods that are - not quite so good. As an aside, I was struck by how much we actually read in a normal church service - the the Hebrew Bible or Old Testament, a Psalm, something from Epistles, the Gospels - it's quite a bit. The lectionary, which provides preachers with the citations for scriptural readings, provided an alternate reading from the book of Kings. In the one which we did not read, the prophet Elijah has all the false prophets of Baal seized and killed by the people to whom he is preaching. In the one that we did read, Solomon only tells the people of Israel that foreigners will fear the Lord's judgement as do the Israelites, because that judgement is just, just and righteous to foreigners as it is to the Israelites, with no distinction between the one or the other.

Paul seems to have something of the same sense as he is telling the Galatians that he is not bent on persuading them of the virtues of one Gospel over another, only that one Gospel is that given to him by Jesus the son of God. The Gospel that he gave to them is that Gospel - any other Gospel is therefore false, not because he, Paul, does not believe what it says, but because it did not come from God. So, it's a matter of source. We have to see then that the reading from Luke is vastly different though it deals with some similar issues. Here, Jesus is beseeched by the Centurion, a Roman soldier and therefore a foreigner, to please come and save his slave, a young man, who was "ill and close to death." And the Centurion, not only recognizes Jesus' special abilities in these matters, but is sensitive enough to also realize that it might not be good for

*McKenzie, Alyce, *The Faith of a Soldier*

***Preacher Rhetorica Proper 4C Luke 7 1-10 TS Eliot, Little Gidding, The Four Quartets*

****Rowan Williams, International Bonhoeffer Congress 2006*

Jesus to sully himself by putting his physical being in a foreigner's house, and sends word, that Jesus really needn't come to the house, that his word alone would be sufficient. Jesus is astonished at the Centurion's understanding of the situation, and of course, the young man is saved.

This is all about putting yourself in someone else's place, isn't it? And it is the Centurion who is doing that transference, not Jesus. So the story is about the foreigner as one possessed of goodness and talents, not as in the other scriptural sources, as people to be converted or avoided or, perhaps, destroyed.

When I read these lines to myself for the first time, and I had not known this story before, I had to read them over several times, for they had such a good ring to them. "Lord, do not trouble yourself, for I am not worthy to have you come under my roof; therefore I did not presume to come to you. But only speak the word and let my servant be healed. For I also am a man set under authority, 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." And Jesus said that he was amazed and had never seen such faith, even in Israel.

But maybe the whole point of this story is that it is because the man is not a native, that he is not the kind of man from whom one would expect this kind of behavior. He is, in fact, the kind of man from whom one would expect entirely the opposite. There were a lot of Roman soldiers stationed in and about Judea in those days and they were experienced by the natives as mostly brawny, not too brainy, and often abusive of the citizenry. That's the kind of reputation that an occupying army often gets, our own included.

So here we have a guy who not only displays a remarkable respect for Jesus, knows that it may not be the right thing for him to go to the house of an outsider, an occupier,

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but also knows where to put his faith to get the job done. “We have a Roman soldier, of whom people would be rightly suspicious, displaying a confidence in Jesus as a spiritual Commander that Jesus seems to find compelling.” He knows where to look for the object of his faith.*

But as many seekers will tell us, it’s not always so easy to find the object of one’s faith. People travel far and wide, sit silently for many weeks and months, waiting for faith to come to them. One author, writing about this Gospel passage, talks about the North Sea island of Lindisfarne where there is a ruined Abbey of Saint Aidan, where the great Celtic missionaries of the church had their home and where many folks even now come by walking across the Pilgrim’s Way. T.S. Elliot wrote of it:

“If you came this way
Taking any route, starting from
anywhere
At any time or at any season
It would always be the same: you
would have to put off
Sense and notion. You are not here to verify
Instruct yourself, or inform curiosity
Or carry report. You are here to
kneel
Where prayer has been valid.”**

Just as T.S. Eliot and these pilgrims recognize faith in this place where it has been seen so often, so the Centurion knows it in Jesus, where he sees his intrinsic authority,

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doubtless because he is a man who, as he says, is trained to respond to and live by authority.

Not everyone sees this in Jesus. Many of those who live around him think him mad or a troublemaker, but the Centurion saw in him the power to command and to inspire faith. And he is not waiting for Jesus to demonstrate his power before he gives him his faith. This is a man who, though a foreigner, has built a synagogue for the Jewish people of Capernaum, has made himself a helper of the community, has therefore heard enough about Jesus to have decided that he can give him his trust.

Thus when his slave, for whom he cares very much, falls ill, and Jesus is in the neighborhood, he asks for the help of the man who can provide the well being he needs.

I think that the lesson about the story of the Centurion lies with the fact of his foreignness. It's not about how Jesus and the followers of Jesus treat the Centurion, not about how Solomon thinks about the foreigners who might be thinking of his God, or of the Gospels that Paul is trying to get the Gentiles and the Jews to be universally accepting of. It's more about how God dwells always with the outliers, that Jesus is himself an outlier and embraces those others who dwell outside the boundaries of society. So the Centurion, an outsider, though he is a Roman, built a synagogue, and, though he is a Roman, has faith in Jesus. Here is something from the International Dietrich Bonhoeffer Congress from 2006, on this notion: "there is one story, which contains all others; and the center of that story is the perpetually displaced God who addresses us from the edge of human affairs, who has chosen the place of the excluded. Culture is not to be rejected or given theological legitimacy; it is a fact with which we have no choice but to engage. However, our engagement as Christians must be determined by the question of who or what the culture is currently forgetting, since it is there that we are likely to find God waiting for us."***

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The Centurion though a man of power is an outsider. He is an outsider in the place that he lives, certainly, and he is an outsider among his community of soldiers, for his behavior is far different from theirs. But rather than making him arrogant or hostile, his outsider status makes him empathic. He is anxious on behalf of his slave who has no power and no voice of his own. He recognizes Jesus' situation and he has faith in him. It takes love to know love; it take a person of authority to recognize a person of authority; and maybe it does take an outsider to demonstrate the boundless love of God.

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