

A Certain Centurion

And a certain centurion's servant, who was dear unto him, was sick, and ready to die...
– Luke 7:2 –

We are no doubt familiar with the account of Jesus' healing of the centurion's servant in Luke 7:1-10 and its parallel synoptic testimony in Matthew 8:5-13. As with almost every aspect of the gospel accounts of our Lord, the inspired writers relay what appear to be a simple set of facts surrounding a historical event in the life of Christ which, while presenting enough truth to challenge and edify even the most casual reader, are in their fullest reality bottomless wells for the truth-seeker, supplying holy-minded enquirers with a vast trove of insight into the deepest aspects of both human and divine nature. Such is the case with this "certain centurion". Let us pause to consider this man whose faith our Savior publicly approbated before many witnesses.

Centurions were officers in the Roman legions. They were well-paid, acted as figure heads as well as keepers of the *Pax Romana*, enjoyed a certain modicum of social "status", and were in every aspect soldiers themselves, usually rising through the ranks over time or by momentous event to their position. Our perception of this class of Roman citizen might naturally incline us to believe this man to be a proud, callous, brutal warrior, neither fearing God, nor regarding man. Such inclination, while potentially accurate about a broad swath of the members of this social stratum, would be horribly incorrect about this "certain" centurion. Consider the following.

This man is an individual descendent of Adam, made in the image of God. His humanity is conveyed to us when we read that he has a servant (i.e., slave) who is "dear unto him". His devotion toward God and His people is relayed when we are told that he built these Jews in Capernaum a synagogue, and that the elders of the Jews there deemed this Gentile "worthy" of Jesus' attention. His humility and propriety confront us in his repeated confessions of his unworthiness to entertain Christ. His faith astounds us (and even makes Jesus Himself "marvel") when he insists that he knows that Christ can heal his palsied servant with nothing more than a word from a distance, exhibiting that he understands more about just who Jesus is than perhaps anyone had been able to dare believe at this point in the Master's ministry.

(Let us note as well the contrast between the quality of this man's faith and that of the nobleman that we meet in the fourth chapter of John. That man cried in exasperation, "Come down ere my child die!" (John 4:49), seemingly counseling Jesus as to how to answer his petition. This centurion, however, possesses a deeper and radically mature faith that dares not offer counsel, but humbly and plainly confesses that Jesus only need "say in a word, and my servant shall be healed.")

How convicting is it to realize that this man who we may have passed by as just another brute beast, ascribing to him in our hearts and minds the same sin-laden characteristics of many or even the majority of those who held a like occupation and position, actually possessed and displayed one of the most sincere and humble of personal faiths attested to in the whole of the New Testament? And how frequently do we make similar mistakes regarding those whom we encounter today? Do we assume because a person is of a certain political persuasion, or occupation, or social cause, or socio-economic background, or ethnicity, or nationality, or religion, that they could in no way possess a heart disposed toward the fear God and poised to exercise a humble faith in our beloved Lord? Let us eschew such pharisaical inclinations, believing our Lord's encouragements that the fields are white unto harvest, and re-enlisting as His laborers to find such good ground in unexpected places!