

INTRODUCTION

The gospel writers recorded events they regarded as significant. The Holy Spirit also led them. In this instance Jesus' words indicate what makes the event important - it was all about faith in him.

THE CENTURION

A Roman centurion did not seem the most likely person to seek Jesus' help - a foreigner and an officer in the army of occupation. But when a valued servant took ill the centurion sent friends to plead with Jesus on his behalf. Jesus had become known for his healing ministry.

Matthew portrays him as telling Jesus about his servant. The implication is that he thought such information would be enough to elicit Jesus' help. His friends argued that he deserved Jesus' help (something the centurion denied) on the grounds that he proved to be a friend of the Jews. The request was for restoration, comfort, and for life to be spared. That is in line with the prophecies about God's kingdom, e.g. "And no inhabitant will say 'I am sick'; the people who dwell there will be forgiven their iniquity."

The centurion's request was marked by humility. When Jesus said he would come the centurion replied that he was not worthy to have Jesus in his house. He may have been sensitive to current Jewish feelings about associating with non-Jews. He certainly regarded Jesus as superior calling him "Lord". It is the opposite of the attitude of his friends who said he deserved Jesus' help. Such humility is rare. People more often assert themselves and claim 'rights'. That is sometimes appropriate when injustice threatens; but not in our dealings with God who is always just and is superior to us all. When we come to him we can only ask for favours, not for rights. "God oppises the proud, but gives grace to the humble" (James 4:6).

Some people think that faith and humility cannot co-exist. That is not true. If we have faith in our rights we will present ourselves in the best light possible. But if we have faith in God's grace then it does not matter how undeserving we are - because grace means showing kindness to those who do not deserve it.

The centurion had faith in Jesus' ability to heal his servant. He believed that Jesus had a similar authority to himself - he only had to give an order and the thing would be done; he did not need to be anywhere near. He had faith in Jesus - that he was the sort of person who would help the undeserving. What the centurion did not have was a guarantee that Jesus was going to help him in particular. But his faith was strong enough to deal with that uncertainty. There is a lesson for us there. We should not wait until we are sure God is going to save us before we come to Christ for help. We should just accept that Christ is the Saviour of sinners and ask for his help.

JESUS

Jesus was amazed at the centurion's faith. We should not be amazed that people have faith in Jesus - he is eminently trustworthy - but the centurion's faith was greater than that of anyone else. The Jews who surrounded Jesus were highly privileged - the nation was in covenant with God and his promises of salvation through Christ had been given to them. Yet they had less faith in Christ Jesus than this outsider. Those who should have welcomed him and rejoiced in his blessing did not; but the outsider asked for a share in their blessings, though he might have supposed he was excluded. That has happened over the centuries when church people despised their privilege but others wanted it and got it. The centurion's faith was in Christ's grace. He believed Christ's sympathies were not narrow but that his generous heart takes in the whole world.

As Jesus pondered this he predicted what would happen at the end of the age when God's kingdom is complete. There would be strangers like the centurion in heaven while some of God's earthly church would be cast away. That is because they did not have faith in their own Saviour while those strangers did. Jesus spoke of heaven as a banquet, and of hell as a place of inconsolable grief, for they had neglected their God-given opportunity and had lost their last chance.

Jesus then gave a promise to the centurion. His servant would be healed. God's promise of salvation is given to our faith. He responds to our appeal; but if we do not have faith in him we will not ask for his blessing and cannot expect to get it. Jesus gave this great benefit to a man whom many would not have expected to receive it for he was a stranger and a commander of an oppressing army. His friends said he deserved it because of things he had done; he knew he did not. It shows that Christ's blessings come as a matter of grace alone irrespective of who we are or what we deserve.

Christ acted. When the centurion and his friends got home they found his servant had been healed.

US

The centurion's approach shows us how to go to God. It is right to acknowledge his superiority, but we should also acknowledge his grace. It is no sign of humility to question whether he is willing to accept us when he has said he is willing. Unbelief and pride go together; so do humility and faith.

Faith in Christ has nothing to do with what we have done or what we deserve. It has to do only with his grace – his willingness to save and bless without regard to what we are or do.

Whatever we need, let us come to him for it. If our problem is guilt, let us ask for forgiveness. If it is hostility towards God, let us ask him for a new heart. If it is the fear of hell, let us ask him to make us his child, and then to assure us of that.

Jesus' reaction should also be a warning to us. There is such a thing as a churchgoer neglecting their spiritual privileges, failing to ask Jesus for his salvation, and losing their soul as a result. That can only lead to unspeakable sorrow, made worse by knowing that they could have been in heaven, and that this will last forever.

Whatever may happen to any individual, it is certain that a large part of humanity will become the guests of God in the new creation. There will be a wholeness that we do not experience here. The love of God will pervade everything, and there will be nothing out of place – it will be “the home of righteousness”. That is the blessing Christ came to give. That is what faith in him will lead to.