

Sermon, January 23, 2011

### WORTHINESS OF A CENTURION

*But the centurion replied, "Lord, I am not worthy to have you come under my roof, but only say the word, and my servant will be healed. Matthew 8:8*

I few weeks ago seven of us watched "The Robe", the story Marcus Gallio, a Tribune who comes to faith in Christ. In a later scene in the movie, the Tribune, now for the cause of Christ, sees a detachment of soldiers commanded by a battle hardened centurion. The centurion means business and intends to execute the helpless band of Christians. But the Tribune outranks this Centurion and commands him to stand down. Not only that, Marcus Gallio carries a special commission from the Emperor to investigate these Christians and claims jurisdiction over them.

The Centurion is not impressed. "You may outrank me Tribune but I earned my rank". Pointing to the sharp end of his sword he says, "I earned it with this in Gaul and the long hardened campaigns of Iberium and everywhere else. If you are going to command me you're going to have to make me". And with that down goes the gauntlet and out flashes the sword. In a fantastic display of swordsmanship and sheer determination our hero gains the upper hand and amazingly without so much as a shed drop of blood our centurion is defeated.

With that scene we have a window into the social dynamics of rank within Roman society. The centurion's boast isn't unfounded. While the upper classes bought their rank or called in a family favour to establish their sons as higher ranking Tribunes the rank of Centurion wasn't one that you would buy. You earned it. Sometimes commanders would let the troops influence appointments. But it was clear to all who should hold the rank. It was the guy always first over the wall. It was the guy who exemplified the *espri-de-corp*. His uniform was always in order. And while the higher ranking officers held bank behind the lines considered too valuable for their "strategizing" expertise or perceived need to have leadership aware of the full scope of the lines of battle, the centurion was on the line with the troops.

And so of all the officers that they had, the centurion was the one the average soldier most willingly listened to. Most often, he rose up through the ranks from where he was. He was worthy. And you couldn't help but respect him. For the fact remained that of all the troops, centurions suffered casualty rates out of proportion with their numbers. So for those daring enough, brave enough and lucky enough to survive they were valued above all the Emperor's officers.

By virtue of the rank which they earned, these men also generally became self-educated and literate. They mingled into the higher reaches of society with ease. A living centurion became well respected by his subordinates and his superiors. In the case of this particular centurion he had earned the respect of even the Jews around him, as they had earned his respect by their faith. Remember, in Luke's account, it was the Jewish leaders in Capernaum that came beseeching Jesus concerning this man. And they said to Jesus "That he was worthy for whom he should do this for he loves our nation, and he has built us a synagogue (Luke 7:4, 5)". He who was considered worthy to enter unhindered at every level and to receive anyone at every rank finds himself unworthy at the Christ saying "Lord, I am not worthy that you should come under my roof but only say the Word and my servant will be healed".

Jesus is amazed at the man's faith. It begins with knowing who he is, despite what others say he is. That is repentance! The Jewish elders say that he is worthy. His subordinates and superiors say as he passes, "O he who is worthy!" The world says he is worthy. And is this not the message of the world today in the words of the great MacDonald "You deserve a break today"? Are these not the words of every advertiser tempting you to luxury "You are worthy..."? We live in a generation of the worthies and the entitled.

Our Lord cuts through all that as easily as a centurion cuts through flesh with his sword. How powerful is the Word even as Paul expresses it.

*For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart. (Hebrews 4:11-13)*

Had he been one of the soldiers standing around to hear John the Baptist? Had he heard Jesus' expositions of the Law? Had he simply heeded his accusing conscience, God's gift to every man? We don't know the previous scene when this took place. But we know that the Word as it works in the heart tells us we have sinned. We have transgressed God's Law. We know that God is holy and we are the unholy.

Every saint worth his salt, from the Old to New Testament times has come to such a conclusion. And they have come to the conclusion despite their apparent worthiness in the eyes of men. Jacob held the title Patriarch, and God is even known as the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob yet he says "I am not worthy of the least of all mercies". The prophet Isaiah was author of so many detailed prophecies concerning the coming of the Christ known by the early church Fathers as author of the "Fifth Gospel" and yet he says "We are all as an unclean thing and all our righteous acts are as filthy rags". John the Baptist lived as a Nazarite saying "there is one mightier than I whose sandals I am not worthy to untie". St. Paul, although he was given the 40 lashes and was stoned among other things for the Gospel only to survive it all until his beheading nevertheless says "I am least of the apostles and am not worthy to be called an apostle". St. Peter says "Get away from me Lord for I am a sinful man".

So how can any of us think we are worthy? Give the question a good long pause on your soul and you'll soon share in the blessings of the centurion's faith.

Now the centurion did not remain languishing in his sins. He also knew of the message of forgiveness. And he knew the power of Christ's Word. "Just say the word and my servant will be healed". The centurion had either seen, heard or read reliable reports concerning the powerful effective Word of the Christ. Just previously in this text itself we hear of the leper who was cleansed. And the miracles of Jesus were numerous and varied. The effectiveness of Christ's Word could not be denied.

We can take the faith of the centurion a step further. For the centurion, to have Christ in the flesh say the Word from a distance was enough. Should it not be enough for us? That same Word of the Christ has been written down. It has been proclaimed by his servants. It is proclaimed by pastors and teachers in the Church. It carries a similar effectiveness and yes even greater.

What could possibly be greater than to take a sick man risen up from his bed, made well? How about, a sick soul risen up from a sentence of eternal death to enter eternity! Yes. It is true. When forgiveness is proclaimed at this altar; when forgiveness, we call absolution, is given; sick souls destined for hell rise up to life everlasting. And as we learned this morning in Bible Class it is an Eternal Gift.

The Eternal gift begins now. Did you know that it is a present possession? You are like a man holding the deed to a Kingdom in his hand on a long journey to that kingdom. Does he possess the Kingdom before he has even seen it? Absolutely. As long as you hold the faith, you possess an eternal kingdom. It is as John the Baptist proclaimed, "Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life (John 3:36)"

The centurion had great words *"Lord, I am not worthy to have you come under my roof, but<sup>o</sup> only say the word, and my servant will be healed"*. Neither are we worthy. No matter what the world might say about us. No matter what appearance of righteousness the world is duped into thinking that we possess. The heart speaks the truth. I am not worthy. We should not expect Jesus to manifest himself in the flesh at our bedside. Be content with the Word. And the word brings healing. For the sake of the servant there was physical healing. But for us there is the greater promise. It is a healing lasting into eternal life.

Yes, it can happen for us. The Centurion at Capernaum wasn't the only centurion in the life of Christ to come to great faith. Another Centurion at Capernaum asked and obtained from our Lord the healing of his sick child, after the physicians had been employed in vain. Next comes the one who kept watch at the cross of Christ, at whose death, being seized by an overwhelming conviction of the truth, he cried out, 'Truly this was the Son of God!' Lastly, there is Cornelius, who, in mind and character, humility and faith, bears a strong resemblance to the first at Capernaum. The Word repeated the miracle of making the worthies see their unworthiness, then casting their trust on Word Incarnate.

God can work in the lives of all of us. The Words of the Centurion can be made our own. In many liturgies across denominational lines, the words of the centurion have been modified to become a prayer known as "The Prayer of Humble Access". Let us pray that prayer.

Lord, I am not worthy, but only say the word and I shall be healed. Amen.