

The Great Fifty Days of Easter have come and gone. And we have come to the season after Pentecost. The Holy Spirit dwells among us. What does that mean to us then? How does this change our lives?

Today's scriptures give us some good pointers: Solomon intercedes for the "foreigners", Jesus is amazed by a centurion's faith, and Paul is astonished by how fast the early Christians forgot what they were taught.

In today's OT reading from 1 Kings we heard that King Solomon had just finished building the grand temple for God. He "assembled the elders of Israel and all the heads of the tribes, the leaders of the ancestral houses of the Israelites" and prayed to God. Solomon pledges to God to hear the foreigner who is not God's people of Israel, to hear this foreigner's prayers so "that all the peoples of the earth may know your name and fear you."

In the Gospel, we meet two people of power. One holds military power, the other spiritual power. The one with military power is desperate because his valued slave is ill. He could have sent his soldiers to take Jesus to go to his place to heal his slave. Nevertheless, he asks Jewish elders instead to *invite* Jesus to heal his slave. Not only does he choose not to use violence, but in humility he asks Jesus heal his slave from a distance. Jesus, the spiritual leader is amazed at his faith. Jesus says, "I tell you, not even in Israel have I found such faith." The cultural and class boundaries between these two leaders are brought down. A person is healed.

Due to instability and violence in the Middle East, Europe has been struggling with a great influx of refugees. However, the fear of overcrowding and of terrorist infiltration is so great that people, even Christians, oppose the humanitarian act of accepting these people. Yet the Church is Christ agent here – what are we to do?

Saint Paul admonishes the Galatians and says that he is "*astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel...*" Jesus has commanded the disciples "to love your neighbours." What has happened to his teaching? Are we deserting the Gospel of Jesus, rejecting the neighbours who are foreigners and in dire situation.

In this season after Pentecost, the lectionary guides us to consider the application of Jesus' teaching in our ministries. Fresh into this season, we are shown Solomon's intercession for foreigners.

King Solomon has built the house for God, but he asks, "But will God indeed dwell on the earth? Even heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain you, much less this house that I have built!" (actually that bit from v 27 was left out of our reading today!)

Let us not confine God to our liking, our church, or our belief. God is much bigger than that. Let us follow Jesus' teaching to "love your neighbours."

But let us return to the Gospel reading!

Now, centurions show up rather frequently in the Gospels and in Acts. This in itself is not surprising, since centurions would have been very much a part of the scenery in those days. What is surprising is that these representatives of Roman occupation are portrayed in quite positive ways in the New Testament. They end up responding to Jesus and his kingdom message with a recognition of his identity and, sometimes, with faith.

The story of the centurion and his terminally ill servant speaks to us on various levels. First, it is the story of an army officer who cares about a beloved servant. Deeper yet, it tells of a proud military leader who is so humble that he sends others to ask Jesus' aid. At still a deeper level, here is a foreigner who understands better than any of his day how far Jesus' authority extends and how it operates. Where can we find ourselves in this story?

While Rome had its own troops garrisoned in Jerusalem and Caesarea, each of the petty kings who governed under the Romans also had military forces modelled on the Roman pattern. So our centurion was probably attached to the army of Herod Antipas who ruled the area. From the text it is clear that he is not a Jew.

Vegetius, an historian from the latter part of the Roman Empire, described in his book *The Epitome of Military Science* the qualities of a centurion in rather glowing terms.

*A centurion is chosen for great strength and tall stature, as a man who hurls spears and javelins skilfully and strongly, has expert knowledge how to fight with the sword and rotate the shield, and has learned the whole art of armature. He is alert, sober, and agile, and more ready to do the things ordered of him than speak, keeps his soldiers in training, makes them practice their arms, and sees that they are well clothed and shod, and that the arms are burnished and bright.*

But the centurion posted to the Capernaum garrison is far more than just a military leader. The text reveals several remarkable things about his character.

He is deeply moved by the sickness and imminent death of a beloved friend.

He is also deeply respected by the religious community in Capernaum. Though he is not Jewish, he is certainly sympathetic to the Jewish faith. "He loves our nation," the community elders tell Jesus, "and has built our synagogue." Isn't it a fact worth considering, that those who come to live with us often are assimilated into our ways, and we learn from them too!

The centurion is depicted as a deeply humble man. Centurions don't lead by being bashful or self-effacing. Yet this centurion never actually appears personally before Jesus to plead his cause (certainly in Luke's account). Instead, he sends others in his place, because of a sense of personal unworthiness. The friends are told to say, "Lord, don't trouble yourself, for I do not deserve to have you come under my roof". The centurion has a very clear sense of who Jesus is, and what his level of authority is. His humility is grounded in a profound respect for Jesus' position. And since he sees himself as undeserving, he is all the more aware of the pure grace with which Jesus operates. "He clearly knew his place"!

*- Lao Tzu (that ancient military strategist)*

*I have three precious things which I hold fast and prize.  
The first is gentleness;  
the second is frugality;  
the third is humility, which keeps me from putting myself before others.  
Be gentle and you can be bold;  
be frugal and you can be generous;  
avoid putting yourself before others  
and you can become a leader among men.*

For most of Jesus' disciples, their faith grows gradually as they see Jesus exerting power of an ever widening circle -- blind, lepers, the dead, the powerful storm on the sea of Galilee. After Jesus had calmed the waters they are stunned, and Jesus asks them "Where is your faith?"

"Who is this?", they ask, "He commands even the winds and the water, and they obey him." They have walked with him for a year or so, and still haven't figured out the extent of Jesus' power. But the centurion has a profound understanding without even meeting Jesus in person.

*We come nearest to the great  
when we are great in humility.*

*- Rabindranath Tagore*

The centurion understood clearly was that a person in authority has the power to delegate authority to accomplish his purposes. He doesn't have to do it himself in person. "When Jesus heard this, he was amazed at him, and turning to the crowd following him, he said, 'I tell you, I have not found such great faith even in Israel.' "

We see in our Holy Gospel today a great example of love and faith, at which even our Lord Jesus was amazed.

There just has to be a link here for us between love & respect & humility and faith.

**Love** means to commit oneself without guarantee, to give oneself completely in the hope that our **love** will produce **love** in the **loved** person. **Love** is an act of **faith**, **and** whoever is of little **faith** is also of little **love**.

- [Erich Fromm](#) (German psychoanalyst 20<sup>th</sup> C)