

Jesus was born in Bethlehem and grew up and lived in Nazareth. But in all 4 Gospels, a major amount of his ministry centered on the village of Capernaum.

If you make a pilgrimage to Israel today, one of the sites you visit in Capernaum is the excavated Jewish synagogue. When you enter you see ruins of white stone walls that were part of a renovation several centuries after Jesus' time. But the floor, the foundation that you stand on, dates back to the first century. When I stood on those ancient stones, I felt a profound connection to the time of Jesus.

And today in our Gospel lesson, we hear about a man who helped build that synagogue. We hear about a centurion, and we hear about his faith.

Luke begins his account in the 7<sup>th</sup> chapter by telling us of this centurion who "had a slave whom he valued highly, and who was ill and close to death."<sup>1</sup>

Luke continues: "When (the centurion) heard about Jesus, he sent some Jewish elders to him, asking him to come and heal his slave."

First of all, who is this guy, and why is he sending intermediaries to Jesus?

Well, a centurion was a fairly high ranking Roman soldier who in turn commanded about 100 soldiers. A centurion would be roughly equivalent to a captain in today's army.

And Rome wanted to make sure their centurions were loyal and they paid them well—a centurion's pay was about 16 times the salary of that of the soldiers they commanded.

We don't know if this centurion is stationed in Capernaum or if he retired there. The Romans often encouraged centurions to retire in dispersed and different places in the empire to be small centers of Roman influence in the midst of an occupied populace.

But why is this centurion sending intermediaries to Jesus? Turns out this is a very normal and culturally sensitive thing to do. Instead of flexing his muscle or summoning Jesus, he asks some Jewish leaders to go ask a favor of Jesus. Asking favors in the Roman Empire was a hugely important part of the culture. The Romans have a very strong sense of hierarchy—you had patrons above you, and clients below you. And you did favors up and down the chain—one hand would wash the other.

Think of the classic scene from the beginning of the movie, *The Godfather*. The undertaker comes to Don Corleone asking a favor. And the Godfather grants the favor with these words:

"Someday, and that day may never come, I'll call upon you to do a service for me. But until that day, accept this justice as a gift on my daughter's wedding day."

That's a situation the Romans would understand perfectly.

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<sup>1</sup> Luke 7:2

So the centurion sends Jewish elders from the village to Jesus asking him a favor. The elders say, "He is worthy of having you do this for him, for he loves our people, and it is he who built our synagogue for us."<sup>2</sup>

Apparently, this centurion is a pretty nice guy. He has used his money to build the local synagogue. He loves the local people. Thus the elders deem him worthy of having Jesus heal the man's slave.

In Jesus' day, this would all be normal up to this point.

But then the story takes an unexpected turn.

Jesus nears the man's house. But the centurion sends some friends out to stop Jesus.

The Jewish elders would have been in a patron/client relationship below the centurion. But the word "friends" implies social equality. So the centurion is sending out even higher ranking folks to intercept Jesus. And their message is amazing.

The centurion has sent them to say on his behalf,  
"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."<sup>3</sup>

Don't miss what's happening here.

First, the centurion sent out those below him, the Jewish leaders. They came to Jesus and asked him to come since the centurion was worthy of Jesus help.

But now the centurion has sent those on his level with a startling message: I am not worthy to have you come to me, to come under my roof. AND, I'm not presuming to come to you. And actually the word presume is related to one of the words for unworthy. So the centurion's message is a double "I'm unworthy."

And we don't think in these terms, but the message would be crystal clear in Jesus day. If the centurion has sent out those below him and then those equivalent to him, and then if he says he is unworthy to have Jesus come to him, this all shows that the centurion is placing Jesus on a level above him. This is a message of amazing humility. This is a message that says to Jesus, "I don't view you as a client below me. I don't view you as an equal. I see you as a patron above me."

And then the centurion says something even more remarkable. He says,

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<sup>2</sup> Luke 7:5-6

<sup>3</sup> Luke 7:6-7

"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."

The centurion knows the chain of command. He knows the social pecking order. He has placed Jesus on a higher rung than himself.

And the centurion knows that he can give orders to those under him and they will do what he commands.

And not only is he saying that Jesus is above him. He is also is saying that Jesus is above such powers and forces as sickness and disease, and perhaps even death. This is an absolutely remarkable statement of faith.

And Jesus recognizes and acknowledges it. He says,  
"I tell you, not even in Israel have I found such faith."<sup>4</sup>

And apparently Jesus has exactly the level of power the centurion thinks he has. <<*snap fingers*>> For when they return, they find the slave is healed.

The centurion is a powerful man who knows his own power. Yet he also knows the limits of his own power. And he acknowledges that Jesus is more powerful still. And in point of fact, that's exactly right. Jesus never meets the centurion. He never meets the centurion's slave. Yet he does have the power to heal him. And he uses it.

Do we know the limits of our own power? We're pretty sophisticated people. We have incredible technology. We've been blessed with a standard of living in our culture that is far higher than most people in the world today. We live lives that are far more comfortable than those of even the richest and most powerful people in centuries past.

But do we know the limits of our own power? We often discover them, sometimes when we least expect it. When the doctor walks in with a frown on his or her face. When the phone rings unexpectedly in the middle of the night. When the news comes of a death or a tragedy. At such time we smack right into the wall of the limits of our own power.

But there is a greater power. And it is spiritually essential that we acknowledge the source of that power.

At our 8:00 service every week, there's a wonderful ancient prayer we pray before receiving communion.

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<sup>4</sup> Luke 7:9

*We do not presume to come to this thy Table, O merciful Lord, trusting in our own righteousness, but in thy manifold and great mercies. We are not worthy so much as to gather up the crumbs under thy Table. But thou art the same Lord whose property is always to have mercy. Grant us therefore, gracious Lord, so to eat the flesh of thy dear Son Jesus Christ, and to drink his blood, that we may evermore dwell in him, and he in us. Amen.*

Some people in recent years have criticized that old prayer. It's too downbeat. We sound like a bunch of lowly worms groveling in the dirt.

And yet I love that prayer. Because it does acknowledge something hugely important. Lord, I can't ultimately trust in my own righteousness, or my own power, or my own prestige, or any other thing that we prize so much in our culture. Ultimately, I can only trust in your many and great mercies.

Every week at Mass, our Roman Catholic friends pray a similar prayer. But it's a simpler version. In fact, it is based on the words of the centurion. Right before receiving communion they pray,

"Lord, I am not worthy to receive you, but only say the word and I shall be healed."

Or in the newer version,

"Lord, I am not worthy that you should enter under my roof, but only say the word and my soul shall be healed."

Lord, you have given me much. But I know my limitations. I come to your table. And I ask for your power, your grace, your healing.

I'm not worthy. But I trust in you. I trust in you.

Say the word, and my soul shall be healed.