

Saturday, February 25, 2023
Season of Lent
Day 4

Matthew 8:5–13

⁵ When Jesus had entered Capernaum, a centurion came to him, asking for help. ⁶ “Lord,” he said, “my servant lies at home paralyzed, suffering terribly.”

⁷ Jesus said to him, “**Shall I come and heal him?**”

⁸ The centurion replied, “Lord, I do not deserve to have you come under my roof. But just say the word, and my servant will be healed. ⁹ For I myself am a man under authority, with soldiers under me. I tell this one, ‘Go,’ and he goes; and that one, ‘Come,’ and he comes. I say to my servant, ‘Do this,’ and he does it.”

¹⁰ When Jesus heard this, he was amazed and said to those following him, “**Truly I tell you, I have not found anyone in Israel with such great faith. ¹¹ I say to you that many will come from the east and the west, and will take their places at the feast with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven. ¹² But the subjects of the kingdom will be thrown outside, into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.**”

¹³ Then Jesus said to the centurion, “**Go! Let it be done just as you believed it would.**” And his servant was healed at that moment.

Reflection

If we read Scripture looking for the moral of the story, then we might conclude that what Matthew wants us to do is have a BIG faith like the centurion. That is certainly a valid insight. The centurion’s faith is admirable. But, that leaves a lot of details of this story on the cutting room floor. If we accept the first insight, we should then ask “what else is going on here?”

Well, I propose this passage is about a shocking revelation regarding who is an ‘insider’ and who is an ‘outsider.’ This is a Roman soldier in charge of the territory who represents the foreign oppressive rule of Rome. He has crossed an invisible barrier to ask Jesus a favour with no basis for it to be granted. And, rather than a flat out refusal by a Jewish person to a Gentile, Jesus says “I will come and heal him” (I’m not sure why the NIV makes it a question). Jesus—a teacher of the Jewish/Mosaic Law—is willing to enter into this Gentile’s house, making himself unclean (not sinful, just unable to enter the temple to worship God for a period; undesirable!).

Then, beyond all expectation of a Jewish hearer, the Gentile says “don’t do that, I don’t want to put you in that position.” Additionally he admits that it is not necessary for Jesus to do that. He is a man who understands the relationship of power and authority. If Jesus can heal at all then he merely needs to do it—distance plays no part in it at all.

Jesus marvels! That is what the crowds usually do at his own teaching and miracles, but he marvels at this Gentile’s insight into the true nature of the kingdom while so many Jewish people who have grown up in the ethos of Moses fail to grasp it. He then offers an insight that should chill us all. Those who often seem to be insiders will be revealed to be outsiders in the age to come, and those who seem to be outsiders (like this man) will be revealed to be insiders in the age to come.

Just think for a minute: who do you assume to be an outsider. Does that make you an insider? Can you picture the great feast where they sit at the table with all the great heroes of faith while you stand on the outside looking in, unable to enter? Why is this so? Because they have understood the nature of the kingdom at a deeper level and they have entered into it wholly. While we have taken it for granted, assuming our seat is secure, we have more often denied the kingdom to others. If you dare, go back and reread the beatitudes in chapters 5 to 7 through this lens, it will change the way it reads.

Of course, the point is not to make people feel unsure of their future. Instead, it is an invitation to enter the kingdom now through the Messiah, Jesus. The point is to get us asking, seeking, and knocking urgently. It is to move us from status quo to people seeking the kingdom of God. Again, the season of Lent is about preparation. Maybe a part of that preparation is the putting aside the assumptions we hold as to who are the insiders and the outsiders. Not so that it moves us to inactivity or silence, but to ensure that the kingdom of God is extended to all people because it is for all people.

Prayer

Lord, forgive us for treating the kingdom as our God-given right and for keeping it away from those who we deem unworthy of it. Grant to us the deep desire and understanding of the kingdom that the centurion showed. May we too sit at the table with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Amen.