

16 - HUMILITY + FAITH = HEALING

A new phase of the gospel narrative begins as Luke 7:1-50 tells of several instances of how Jesus' ministry moved forward. In each case Luke had his mixed audience of Gentiles and Jews in mind. The implications of what Jesus had said and done also foreshadowed difficult times ahead.

The healing of the Roman centurion's servant would have been heard differently by different elements of Luke audience. Some Gentiles would have heard it as a friendly gesture toward an extreme outsider, albeit a person of authority who humbled himself beyond all expectations. Others, especially those of the servant or slave class, would have heard the story as an unusual act of kindness toward underprivileged people like themselves.

On the other hand, Jewish Christians living in a totally Gentile environment would have recognized it as approval of their openness to a foreign culture that their more orthodox Jewish neighbours would have tried to avoid.

The story of Jesus healing the centurion's slave also appeared in Matthew 8:5-13 and John 4:46-51, each with its own context and purpose. In Luke's version of the tradition, the centurion is the star of the story although never appearing on stage. Instead he is represented first by Jewish elders, then by some friends. It is his uncharacteristic humility that stands out despite his powerful post as a Roman military officer. His duty was to exercise Roman imperial power in Capernaum, where Herod Antipas also had some authority as Rome's puppet king in Galilee.

This is the only instance of Jesus healing someone at a distance. In telling of this incident, Luke shows a remarkable acceptance of the institutions and customs of

the society as they were at that time, militarism and slavery in particular. Yet the centurion also recognized that Jesus had an even greater though different authority than his.

This is the only instance of Jesus healing someone at a distance. Notably, Jesus' word alone without his physical presence had power to heal. Jesus recognized the centurion's faith, not his powerful office. This would have given considerable hope to Luke's audience who lived in a distant place long after the ministry of Jesus had ended in his death. It also lays the grounds for our hope that in every action that brings health, the spirit of the living God is still present and at work.

In an earlier passage (4:25-27) Luke had referred to two well-known stories about the prophets Elijah and Elisha demonstrating God's saving presence to Gentiles rather than Jews. Later, in Acts 10, he told of Peter converting another Roman centurion, Cornelius, by preaching to his assembled household. All of these passages in Luke's narrative gave evidence of the authority of the word the disciples were commissioned to carry to the world.

Many people today suspect the usefulness of proclaiming the gospel in sermon, story or action. Here is the encouragement we need to go on identifying ourselves with the ministry of Christ in our worship and in our workplace, however humbly.