



The Centurion of Mk. 14:39 by Cranach the Elder

In today's reading from Luke 7, we come across the Centurion of great faith. Centurions occur rather frequently in the Bible. There is of-course the Centurion who, standing at the foot of the Cross of Calvary is the very first person in all the world to profess the crucified Jesus as the Messiah, when he proclaims at Golgotha, "Surely this man was the son of God." (see Mk.14:39) There is the Centurion whom God visits in Acts 10, Cornelius, entrusted with a particular message for Simon Peter – Peter who will become the leader of the new Church. There is the Centurion at the end of the Book of Acts into whose care Paul is given for his final journey to Rome. And then there is the Centurion of this morning in Luke 7, the one who had a greater faith than anyone the Lord had encountered in all Israel. Isn't it strange that although these Roman officers would certainly have been considered enemies of the Jewish state, officers in the army of occupation, never-the-less the New Testament treats these Centurions with such great respect and even admiration?

And what do we know about these particular Roman military officers? Well, after reforms in the Roman forces of 107 BC, the Centurion was defined as an officer who commanded 100 men, and these "Centuriae" became the main building block of the Roman army. Centurions had to be literate, have connections – the had to obtain letters of recommendation – be at least 30 years of age, and had already served a significant time in the military.¹

From a document transcribed in the 5th century by the Roman writer Vegetius, we can read the following:

"The centurion in the infantry is chosen for his size, strength and dexterity in throwing his [javelin] and for his skill in the use of his sword and shield; in short for his expertness in all the [military] exercises. He is to be vigilant, temperate, active and readier to execute the orders he receives than to talk; he must be strict in exercising and keeping up proper discipline among his soldiers, in obliging them to appear clean and well-dressed, and to have their arms constantly cleaned and bright."²

One more interesting fact about the Centurions is that they were often promoted from the rank-and-file soldiers. So they knew a thing or two about obedience. The reason I think this is so key is that there seems to be a connection, at least in the eyes of the Lord Jesus between obedience and faith. You see, this man's life has been built on obedience. First, he learned very well what obedience meant in his life of a soldier. He was well trained in what it signified to follow faithfully a command from a superior officer. And this Centurion had come to understand that a truly great commander, one you could follow even against the threat of death was one who had demonstrated faithfulness in his own life, the way he lived that life, the way he conducted himself, the manner in which he treated others. And this Centurion had come to understand that a man who practiced that kind of obedience was a man who surely backed up what he said with the truth. And if this strange man The Lord Jesus was truly doing all the marvelous things that people testified to, then he must be a man of absolute obedience, absolute truth. And so, if this amazingly obedient and truthful man said his servant was going to be alright, well that was something this Centurion could take to the bank.

¹ <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Centuria#Military>

² [Vegetius](#). De Re Militari II, 14

The word of Jesus was all this Roman soldier required, you see, because this Centurion had complete faith in the word of a man like Jesus. Why, this Roman soldier had had to lay his life on the line more than once based on the promises and commands of his own superior officers. Yes, there is something as strong as tempered steel in that bond that forges together faith and obedience. Because without one there cannot be the other.

If the first thing to note about this Roman military man is how he had nourished his faith through a life of obedience, the other thing I noted from this passage was this man's unique view on what is truly worthy in the world.

The Jews who came to Jesus with the request to help this man told the Lord that this Roman soldier deserved Christ's healing help for his servant, because this foreigner had done much for them – why he had even built their synagogue (see Lk.7:5). In their eyes, these works made this military man worthy of the Lord's grace. But did you notice how the Centurion looked at life? This Roman officer actually believed he was so **unworthy** that he didn't even deserve the Lord Jesus to be a guest in his house. "Lord" he said, "Do not trouble yourself, for I am not so worthy as to have you come under my roof" (Lk.7:6b). What astounding humility! And what a different way of looking at the world!

From the point of view of the Evangelist Luke, it would seem that as well as this link which exists between great obedience and great faith, there is also another connection to observe here, and it is the link between great faith and great humility. Apparently, if we are to nourish unshakable faith in the blessings of our God, we must need admit how little we deserve those blessings. So, great faith requires great humility.

The final point that struck me about this passage was that Jesus was astonished. We read that when Jesus heard what the Roman Centurion had to say he was amazed at the man's faith. Jesus told the crowd "I have not found such great faith in all of Israel" (Lk.7:9). What an astounding thing that God himself should be amazed! I'm not sure I can recall a single other place in the entire Bible where the Son of God himself stood amazed, except in this case of the faith of this foreigner, this outsider, the humble faith of this obedient soldier.

So, as is so often my habit, I need to ask you another few questions this morning. Are you living a life of obedience? Are you waking up each new morning with the simple request of asking the Lord to show you what new service your hands and feet can willingly, joyously perform for him today? Are you allowing your faith in the Son of God to be nourished by acts of joyful obedience? And are you reminding yourself on a daily basis of just how great are the blessings of God in your life, and how absolutely unworthy we all are to actually receive the abundance of that blessing.

In short, are you living your life in such a way so that by your faith God is amazed? What a glorious mission; to live life in such a way that we surprise and delight none other than the Lord of Love himself!

In the name of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. Amen. jwb+ 04-15-16