

The Third Sunday of the Epiphany Season

Matthew 8:1-13

With none in Israel have I found such faith!, our Lord Jesus said. Not only that, He even said: *Truly, I tell you, with none in Israel have I found such faith.* In fact, actually, what He said, as we know it from the original Greek, was: *Amen, I tell you, with none in Israel have I found such faith.* So serious was He about it, apparently; *Amen!*

But why would He even say something like that? Had He not found plenty of faith in Israel? Do we not hear it today that a leper came to Him and knelt before Him and said: *Lord, if you will, you can make me clean.* Was not this an expression of faith? And the leper was not the only one who believed that our Lord Jesus was able to do great things, now, was he? Do we not hear it today, also, that *great crowds followed Him?*

Well, we do. And that leads us, does it not, to ask the question: How was the faith of the centurion different from the faith our Lord Jesus had found with the crowds, and that which He had found with the leper who came to Him and knelt before Him and said: *Lord, if you will, you can make me clean?*

We could make many guesses; but it is probably better that we do not bother. God alone knows the hearts of men, and our Lord Jesus, who is God. Let us just observe that there is faith, and then there is faith. And let us observe what Holy Scripture tells us about the faith of the centurion, that which our Lord Jesus commended as faith greater than any He had found with any one in Israel; from that, we should be able to learn which is the faith that our Lord Jesus finds great, and pleasing to Him, and which is not.

We can observe that the centurion came to our Lord Jesus driven by love for his suffering servant. And this was a good thing, and no doubt pleasing to our Lord Jesus. For love is pleasing to God, and, again, our Lord Jesus is God. Love is, in fact, the very nature of God. *God is love*, as He has had His holy Apostle John write it, *and whoever abides in love abides in God, and God abides in him.*

We have heard it often enough that love is what everything is all about; we have heard it often enough, also, with reference to God and our Lord Jesus. Most often, what those from whom we hear this want us to believe, is that Christians and the Church should not obey God, but obey instead all who demand that we ignore the Word and command of God so as to approve of what they do and want.

The obvious truth is, though, that not all that sinners call *love* is the love taught by God in Holy Scripture; which means that not sinners call love really is love. Love in Holy Scripture refers to the goodness of God, whole and complete as it is, and to the reflection of His goodness in our hearts and minds and lives. In the hearts and minds of sinners, though, the reflection of the goodness of God is always incomplete and insufficient, always distorted by sin, misguided and perverted. For we have lost sight of the goodness of God, because our hearts and minds are turned away from His goodness, and are that from our very first moment of being, and have been ever since our first parents turned away from the goodness of God to seek goodness of their own instead, on their own, apart from God and His goodness. Ever since then, what is in our hearts and minds is always, first and foremost, and even with regards to the faith itself, to seek not the love of God, but rather our own, and the love of this world.

Therefore is it that God has also had His holy Apostle John write that *by this we know that we love the children of God: when we love God and obey His commandments*. This is what love is.

No doubt it was pleasing to God, though, that the centurion had love for his servant, and to our Lord Jesus, also. After all, as He has had His holy Apostle Paul write it, it is from the fatherhood of God that *all fatherhood is named*. All households and all governance and all structures of authority, such as the relationship of master and servant, should reflect the fatherhood of God the Father in the Holy Trinity, that the Son and the Holy Spirit submit to the Father, not under coercion or from necessity, since they are equal to the Father in glory, and in being God, but rather willingly, in *love*. And as such, all households and all governance and all structures of authority, such as the relationship of master and servant, should be one of mutually doing good to each other, each in the position given to us by God. This is *natural law*, that is: it is what common sense demands, and the rules of reality itself; and it is also taught specifically in Holy Scripture that servants must respect their masters, and love them, and serve them well, rather than perform their duties to the minimum, or less, if they can get away with it; and, on the other hand, that an employer must love his workers and act in a such manner toward them as to *earn* their love and respect; he should care about their wellbeing, and the well being of their families, rather than to exploit them so as to squeeze as much work out of them as he can, and pay them as little as he can get away with.

The Fourth Commandment, to *honour your Father and Your mother*, comes with the implication that parents on their part should always act in a such manner as to be *worthy of honour*; Holy Scripture makes this clear, also. So it was no doubt pleasing to God that the centurion cared for his servant, and pleasin to our Lord Jesus.

It is clear, however, from what we hear today, that it was not the love the centurion had for his suffering servant that made our Lord Jesus to find his faith greater than any He had found in Israel; not only because *faith* is something other than love for others to begin with, but also from what Holy Scripture actually tells us about the faith the centurion confessed.

Lord, I am not worthy to have You come under my roof, he said, but say but the word, and my servant will be healed. For I too am a man 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 servant: 'Do this', and he does it.

The faith the centurion confessed was *personal* faith; not because it was his own, as much, but rather in that it was directed at our Lord Jesus *Himself*.

This is different from what is often referred to as *faith*, the idea of an impersonal power operated by positive thinking and personal conviction. This is the notion taught by false preachers and teachers who instruct Christians not to *pray*, but rather to *claim* what they want of God; it is like the superstitious notion of magic and witchcraft: you work your own miracles by applying the appropriate technique; if you use the right words, and convince yourself that you must have your way, then God will have no option but to obey you and do as you command!

Even though false preachers and teachers refer to this superstition as *faith*, it is not what Holy Scripture calls *faith*; it is, in fact, the opposite of entrusting oneself to God and His love.

The faith of the centurion, however, was *personal* faith; it was faith in our Lord Jesus, and knew and acknowledged Him for who He really is, that *He is the radiance of the glory of God*, as the Letter to the Hebrews writes it, and the *exact imprint of His nature*, and *He upholds the universe by His Word of power*.

The centurion acknowledged that our Lord Jesus had no need to actually be where the suffering servant physically was; why would He need to, since He upholds all things by His Word of power?

So we learn this from what we hear today: faith that is pleasing to God is *Christian* faith; it is *personal* faith, in that it relates to our Lord Jesus *Himself*, and not because it is *my* faith of which I myself am in charge.

What Holy Scripture calls *faith* is not the belief I make up for myself, or the confidence I work in myself, that God will give me what I think I should have, and command Him to give to me; rather, faith relates to our Lord Jesus and His love, as we know Him and His love from His Word and from what He has done.

Faith that is pleasing to God acknowledges our Lord Jesus for who He really is and reveals Himself to be; and as such, it also acknowledges who we ourselves are before Him. And so, it confesses, as we hear it today that the centurion confessed it: *Lord, I am not worthy to have You come under my roof; but say but the Word ...*

Faith acknowledges God the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, that He is God, and He alone, which means that I am not. It acknowledges that I owe all my obedience to Him. And as such, it cannot but acknowledge that I fall short of His goodness, and the goodness that I owe it to Him to show in my life, and in my love for Him. It must submit to His judgement, that my failure to love Him before all things and to honour and obey His Word and will in all things, it is evil, and it rightfully brings me under judgement with Him. It acknowledges that all things good must be given to me out of His goodness alone. And so, faith knows of nothing other than to seek mercy with Him. *Lord, I am not worthy to have You come under my roof, as the centurion said it; but say but the Word ...*

What we learn from this, as His Church and His Christians, now that He has brought His work of salvation to completion and is again in heavenly glory with God, is to seek His mercy, first and foremost, and always, in His Word of salvation. Faith that is pleasing to God is faith that acknowledges Him as the Son of God, and God Himself from eternity, who had Himself made to be the suffering servant of God for our salvation, to pay the price and penalty for the sin of all sinners, and win for all sinners full forgiveness for all our sins and shortcomings, and who now gives His own righteousness to sinners, that is: His goodness and innocence before God, with His Word of salvation, in His Baptism, and with His body and blood, in the festive meal of salvation, and so makes us to be one with Himself, and so makes us right with God, and righteous before His judgement. It is faith that trusts in our Lord Jesus, that His Word works what He has said it will work: that salvation from eternal death and damnation is actually given to us, fully and for real, in the Word and worship of His salvation, and eternal life with Him in heavenly glory.

Glory be to God on high, and on earth peace, good will toward men. *Amen.*