

*Faith and Conversion: Lessons from the Centurion*

Theology on Tap  
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Joe Wurtz

I. Intro

Tonight is much less of a talk than a reflection on scripture. In order to appreciate the details of the reflection I am going to read for you the Healing of the Centurion's Servant from Matthew's Gospel chapter 8:5-13. Unlike our Protestant brothers among us, I don't think the Catholics in this room have their pocket sized Bibles to read along.

II. Context of Mt's Gospel: Let me share with you three interesting characteristics of Mt.'s Gospel

A. Mt.'s Gospel was written "in the language of the Hebrews" (either Hebrew or Aramaic) so its immediate readership were Christians of Jewish background.<sup>1</sup> Mt. goes to great length to show in his Gospel that Jesus is the Messiah promised in the Old Testament<sup>2</sup> In other words, his audience was familiar with the Old Testament traditions, i.e. the Law and the Prophets. NB the beginning of the Gospel is a genealogy that the Jewish people would have known and been following closely for it contained the lineage of the king from where the Messiah would come

B. Mt.'s Gospel is considered the Gospel of the Kingdom<sup>3</sup> because of its characteristic theme of the "kingdom of heaven" Mt. emphasizes Jesus kingly mission especially in ch. 13, which is the center of Mt.'s Gospel, there are 7 parables of the kingdom in chapter 13 alone where Jesus is teaching about the mysterious nature of the kingdom, one in which only those who have ears to hear will hear.

C. Mt.'s Gospel is highly structured; each part begins with a narrative and ends with a discourse. For example Chapters 5-7 are discourses where Jesus is teaching and preaching as one having authority unlike any other scribes (e.g. Sermon on Mount, teaching about prayer and fasting, etc.). Chapters 8-9 are narratives detailing Jesus' deeds (e.g. there are 10 miracles, 8 of which are prominent healings), which showcase his divine authority.<sup>4</sup> Chapter 10 is a discourse that serves as a turning point in Mt.'s Gospel because it is here where Jesus commissions the disciples to do what he has done.

III. Centurion's story. It is in chapter 8, a narrative section, where we find our story tonight.

A. What is happening?

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<sup>1</sup> Navarre Bible on Matthew p. 22. *Irenaeus, Origen, Eusebius, and Jerome all bear formal witness that the First Gospel was written by Matthew in the Hebrew tongue or in his (Mt.) mother-tongue.* Catholic Commentary on Holy Scripture 1953 Thomas Nelson and Sons p. 677e.

<sup>2</sup> Navarre Bible on Matthew p. 22 (Mt. 1:23, 2:6, 15, 17-18; 3:3-4; 4:4; 5:17; 26:31; 27:9-10)

<sup>3</sup> 51 times Mt. speaks of "the Kingdom" (14 in Mk., 39 in Lk). *"The marked preference for the Gospel of Mt. in the early Church has remained to this day because it is the gospel of God's kingdom on earth, the Gospel of the Church."* CC on Holy Scripture 1953 p. 678f

<sup>4</sup> Navarre Bible on Matthew p. 19

1. At first glance it looks like another healing story of Jesus.
  2. Jesus enters Capernaum and is approached by the centurion
  3. Centurion has a request namely that his servant is suffering.
  4. Jesus remarks how great the cent. faith is, heals his servant and chides the chosen people the Israelites for their lack of faith
  5. We notice that Jesus heals without seeing or touching the servant
  6. We remember the words, Lord I am not worthy, but only say the word
- B. Who are the characters?
1. Centurion – a Gentile, what was a common understanding of a centurion?<sup>5</sup>
  2. Centurion’s servant – slave, whose place in the world is different
  3. Jesus
  4. The crowd – if any of you are like me, when you watch movies like the Gladiator, you associate most closely with the hero, but I contend that I am more like the crowd, watching the exchange and wishing I had the courage and faith of the centurion.
- C. What is unique about this interaction? (faith, unlike other healings ill is not present, (cf. other healings: cleansing of leper, Peter’s mother-in-law, healing of the paralytic, official’s daughter)
1. What a Man of Great Faith! Emphasis on Faith, not the healing, because of his faith Jesus grants centurion more than what he asked for (namely physical healing and spiritual healing)<sup>6</sup>. Let me contrast this encounter with four others:
    - a. Mt. 9:1-8 Healing of the Paralytic – emphasis on miracle and forgiveness of sins. Jesus saw *their* faith, but paralytic was present for the healing
    - b. Mt. 9:18-19, 23-26 Official’s daughter – emphasis on miracle healing; father asked Jesus to come and lay his hand on her so that she will live. Again Jesus enters house and lays hands on her.
    - c. Mt. 15:21-28 Canaanite Woman’s faith – note Jesus’ response to her plea to heal her absent daughter; her great faith is rewarded; her faith is put to the test<sup>7</sup>
    - d. Mk 9:14-24 father whose son is possessed by mute spirit...”if you can, have compassion on us and help us.” Jesus responds: “If you can? Everything is possible to one who has faith” “Father responds I do believe, help my unbelief.”
  2. Cent. is a Gentile, not one of the covenant, yet he inherits the kingdom. As we heard yesterday in the Gospel of Lk. 13:28-30 “There will be wailing and grinding of teeth when you see Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob and all the prophets in the kingdom of God and you cast out. And people will come

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<sup>5</sup> Command, Major Ray Ceralde In charge of roughly 80-100 men; centurion was highly competitive and sought after post in Roman army; reputation for cruel and harsh taskmasters; aggressive and polytheistic lifestyle, which stood in stark contrast to tenets of Christianity.

<sup>6</sup> John Chrysostom, Homily on Matthew “Wherefore at the centurion He both marvels, and prefers him to all the people, and honors him with the gift of the kingdom”

<sup>7</sup> John Chrysostom, Homily on Matthew “For being a wise physician and full of resources, He knows how to bring about contraries the one by the other. [1096] And as here by His freely-offered coming, so there by His peremptory putting off and denial, He unfolds the woman's faith.”

from the east and the west and from the north and south and will recline at table in the kingdom of God” (cf. Mt. 8:11-12)

3. Jesus “marveled” i.e. “wondered” at this centurion’s faith.<sup>8</sup>

IV. What are the Lessons from the Centurion?

- A. He is searching for Christ with all his heart in earnest. The Centurion, a pagan who submits authority to Rome, calls Jesus Lord and submits to his authority. There is no irony in this encounter. A Roman soldier whose emperors claimed divine sonship<sup>9</sup> is here face to face with the true “Son of God”<sup>10</sup>
- B. He, the stronger, intercedes for the weaker servant
- C. He knows the limits of his power and ability
- D. He merely made known his affliction to Jesus, but did not demand the course of action; it was for Christ to decide what to do.<sup>11</sup> Imagine a man asking for help and not offering solutions. My wife is grinning over this one.
- E. He declared his unworthiness: note the folly of the Jews who in Lk’s account claim that he deserves a favor from Jesus because he was favorable to the Jews and helped with the Temple.<sup>12</sup> Centurion’s humble acknowledgment is passed on

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<sup>8</sup> Augustine super Gen. c. Man. i.8 “When the Lord marvels, it is only to teach us what we ought to wonder at; for all these emotions in Him are not signs of passion, but examples of a teacher.” Aquinas, SCG Bk 4 ch. 33:5 “It says in Mt. that Jesus heard the words of the centurion and “marveled.” One must, then, in addition to the divinity of the Word and His sensitive soul put in Christ that which can make wonder seemly in Him, namely, a human mind.” Professor Mike Brown indicated that Aquinas used this passage to denounce the error of Apollinaris and prove that Christ did indeed have a human soul. Catholic Commentary on Holy Scripture, “As a man, our Lord was capable of wonder, although nothing was hidden from Christ yet a thing could come freshly to his experiential or empiric human knowledge and so produce wonder” (ST, Part 3, Question 15, Article 8 ad. 1).

<sup>9</sup> Benedict XVI Jesus of Nazareth p. 338 “For it is part of that history that Emperor Augustus, under whose dominion Jesus was born, transferred the ancient Near Eastern theology of kingship to Rome and proclaimed himself the “Son of Divine Caesar,” the son of God. While Augustus himself took this step with great caution, the cult of the Roman emperors that soon followed involved the full claim to divine sonship, and the worship of the emperor in Rome as a god was made binding throughout the empire.”

<sup>10</sup> Benedict XVI Jesus of Nazareth p. 339 “At this particular historical moment, then, the Roman emperor’s claim to divine kingship encounters the Christian belief that the risen Christ is the true Son of God, the Lord of all peoples of the earth, to whom alone belongs worship in the unity of Father, Son, and Spirit. Because the title “Son of God” then, the fundamentally apolitical Christian faith, which does not demand political power but acknowledges the legitimate authorities (cf. Rom 13:1-7) inevitably collides with the total claim made by the imperial political power. Indeed, it will always come into conflict with totalitarian political regimes and will be driven into the situation of martyrdom – into communion with the Crucified, who reigns solely from the wood of the Cross.”

<sup>11</sup> Pseudo-Chrysostom, Aquinas’ Catena Aurea on Matthew’s Gospel p. 212 “Mark the cent. faith in that he said not, Come and heal him because that Christ who stood there was present in every place; and his wisdom, in that he said not, Heal him here on the spot, for he knew that He was mighty to do, wise to understand, and merciful to hearken, therefore he did but declare the sickness, leaving it to the Lord, by His merciful power to heal.”

<sup>12</sup> Navarre Bible on Matthew p. 84 *The Jews at this time regarded any Jew who entered a Gentile’s house as contracting legal impurity (cf. Jn 19:28, Acts 11:2-3). This Centurion has the deference not to place Jesus in an embarrassing position in the eyes of the Israelites. John Chrysostom, Homily on Matthew “Mark the folly of the Jews. They should have taken refuge in the love of Jesus toward men; but notice the wisdom of the centurion who affirmed his unworthiness not only of the healing of his servant, but of Jesus even entering his home. Even when Jesus says I will come and cure him, the centurion continues to keep to the end his own proper measure.”*

- to us in the Mass...”Lord I am not worthy to receive you, but only say the word and my soul shall be healed”<sup>13</sup>
- F. He recognized Jesus’ power to heal by his Word without needing to see or touch the lame. Further Jesus performs two miracles simultaneously (Cent. and servant)
  - G. Centurion shows us that Jesus does not dismiss the weak and poor (willing to come to house to cure a servant)
  
  - V. Cornelius – no coincidence that first Gentile convert is a centurion (cf. Acts 10)
  - VI. Alexamenos adoro dio – “Alexamenos, worship God” First century AD graffiti housed in the Palatine Antiquarium in the Roman Forum.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Navarre Bible on Luke p. 101-102 *Such is the faith and humility of the centurion that the Church, in its Eucharistic liturgy, gives us his very words to express our own sentiments just before receiving holy Communion; we too should strive to have this interior disposition when Jesus enters under our roof, our soul.*

<sup>14</sup> The significance of this graffiti is the portrayal of early Christianity by the average Roman. Possibly discovered scratched on a stone in a guard room on Palatine Hill near Circus Maximus. Decker, Rodney