

Encounter with Jesus – The Centurion and his servant – 12 Nov 17

In these services we are looking at people who have had an encounter with Jesus and the effect the encounter had on them. We have looked at quite a few people who met Jesus physically during his ministry and last time we looked at an encounter between Jesus and the Sanhedrin over authority. We are going to keep that theme about authority tonight as we look at the Centurion and his servant. Hilary is going to read us the story.

Luke 7:1-10

Who were the Centurion and his servant?

We don't know their names and this is the only time they are referred to in the Bible – their 15 minutes of fame. As we saw when we looked at Cornelius last June, centurions commanded units of roughly eighty men. Unlike the aristocratic Patricians who could generally become tribunes or legates (the higher ranks equivalent to generals), centurions were generally soldiers who had worked their way up through the ranks, they were the backbone of the Roman army, in charge of discipline. To reach the rank of Centurion he must have been a good and experienced soldier. There was one Legion in Palestine, half of it (5 Cohorts) at Caesarea, the residence of the Roman Governor of Judea, a Cohort in Jerusalem and the other 4 Cohorts were spread around other garrisons. Capernaum was one of the chief cities of Galilee and a fishing town on the North-western shore of the Lake of Galilee. It was a customs station, and was where Jesus called Matthew to leave his tax collecting and to come and follow him. This would have made it important to the Romans and hence it would probably have had a garrison, but as the town probably only had around 1,000 people the garrison would have been small, possibly only one Century. The Centurion may therefore have been the Roman commander in the town. He certainly had good relations with the Jewish Elders having built the synagogue, which also indicates he was probably a God-fearer, a righteous Gentile who followed Jewish customs but who had not been circumcised, a requirement to become a full Jew.

Non-Jews who feared God and donated substantial sums to the Jewish community were well respected. Centurions' salaries were much higher than those of their troops, but for this centurion to have built the local synagogue represented a great financial sacrifice. He is obviously very highly regarded by the local Jewish community as we will see during the encounter. During their twenty or so years of service in the Roman army, soldiers were not normally permitted to marry. By ancient definitions, a household could include servants, and household servants and masters sometimes grew very close—especially if they made up the entire “family” unit.

How did they encounter Jesus?

It is obvious the Centurion valued and cared a lot for his servant, who was seriously ill and probably dying. He had heard about Jesus, possibly through his Jewish contacts or just from news in the town, and he seeks Jesus' help – but not directly, he asks some of the Jewish Elders to approach Jesus on his behalf. This shows he understands Jewish culture and sensitivities about contact with Gentiles. So the encounter was initiated by the Centurion.

What happened during the encounter?

The Jewish Elders take the task on willingly and seriously –they “pleaded earnestly with him” saying “This man deserves to have you do this, because he loves our nation and has built our synagogue.” On other occasions when Gentiles ask Jesus for help he refuses, or at least asks why he should, to see how they respond. Here he accepts the Elders plea and agrees to go with them. The centurion was not a full convert to Judaism and thus retained some of his uncleanness as a Gentile, especially in regard to the food in his home. To invite a Jewish teacher into such a home would have been offensive under normal circumstances, but in this

case the community's elders want to make an exception. However when the Centurion hears Jesus is coming he sends other friends, probably Jews again, to stop him. His message is clear and amazes Jesus (that's impressive – to amaze God): "Lord, don't trouble yourself, for I do not deserve to have you come under my roof. That is why I did not even consider myself worthy to come to you. But say the word, and my servant will be healed. 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." Note he calls Jesus Lord, signifying that he is more important and has more authority than himself. He fully understands Jesus' authority from God to be able to heal his servant, even without physically coming to him. Jesus turns to the crowd and tells them "I tell you, I have not found such great faith even in Israel.", which is a pretty good accolade from God. What does he do then? – nothing according to the account. There is nothing recorded about him praying, saying anything (as the Centurion had suggested) or giving the Jewish friends anything to take to touch the servant with – he was just healed. The men who the Centurion had sent return to the house and find the servant healed and Jesus carries on doing whatever he had been intending to do before the Elders came to him.

What effect did the encounter have on the Centurion and his servant?

The most obvious effect is that the servant was healed from being near death. Presumably this would have increased or at least confirmed the Centurion's faith in Jesus. It would also have had a striking impact on the Jewish community in Capernaum, where Jesus had already performed some miracles, and the wider area. Stories circulated in Jewish society about miracle workers, but reports of long-distance healings were rare and were viewed as more extraordinary than other miracles. Therefore people would view this healing as especially miraculous.

Discussion – There are two questions for you to discuss in your groups and we'll then have a short feedback from each group:

How did the recognition of Jesus' authority affect the faith of the Centurion?

How does the way we recognise Jesus' authority affect our relationship with Him and how we pray?