
The Second Sunday After Pentecost

I Kings 8:41-43

Gal. 1:1-10

Luke 7:1-10

This study will point to a series of areas in the Gospel reading where study should be well repaid in preaching.

1) Try the word *faith*. Faith is hearing (v.3) and trusting the word of Jesus (v.7). This grasping for God's help liberates from enslaving powers, in this case, the serious illness of a dear slave. One could also attempt a series of contrasts in Luke: Zechariah who lacked faith (1:20); Mary who had it (1:45); the paralytic whose sins were forgiven when Jesus saw the faith of the men who brought him (5:20)

2) The *authority* of Jesus. The centurion knew an authority when he saw one; after all, he was a pro at authority himself, telling people to do this and that. His faith knew that the promising word of Jesus was enough. He needed no sign

nor, according to Luke, does he even make personal contact with Jesus. Just say the word. That's enough.

3) This might be a good week to use a synopsis to detect Luke's differences from Matthew (8:5-13) and to trace the distinctive emphases of each account. A good introduction to this technique is provided by Robert Holst, "God's Truth in a Kaleidoscope: Using a Synopsis," *Currents* 3 (1976), 347-354. Reflect upon the following:

a) While the dialogue between Jesus and the centurion is relatively the same in Matthew and Luke, the details of the narrative are different. In Luke the centurion never meets with Jesus but approaches him only through a Jewish delegation and through his own friends. This fact highlights the humility of the centurion ("I did not presume to come to you," v. 6), but it also stresses that the centurion's faith was so great that he needed no personal contact, no sign.

b) The attitude toward the Jews in the two accounts is quite dissimilar. In Matthew, after Jesus has remarked upon the centurion's faith, he adds: "I tell you, many will come from east and west and sit at table with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven, while the sons of the kingdom (= the Jews) will be thrown into the outer darkness; there men will weep and gnash their teeth." (8:11-12) Luke not only does not contain this statement, but he reports that the first delegation from the centurion was made up of Jews friendly to him who even strenuously implored Jesus on behalf of the centurion and his slave: "He is worthy to have you do this for him, for he loves our nation, and he built us our synagogue." These Jews tried to extend Jesus' benefits to a foreigner; they anticipated Luke's own concern for the Gentiles. On the other hand, they show that not all Jews shared the establishment's hostility to Jesus. Luke states that the sick boy was the centurion's slave (v.2) whereas Matthew calls him a servant (v.6). It may be that Luke is using the centurion not only as a model for faith, but as a model for inclusiveness and compassion, taking care even for his slave whom others might consider mere property, only a risky investment. Jesus in Luke befriends sinners and tax collectors and dying criminals on the cross. The (Roman!) centurion is a parade example of a similar attitude among people.

3) A different approach. What's the connection between faith and healing in your theology? in your experience? Two avenues seem worthy of consideration. To what extent do we really expect miraculous intervention in the lives of the people we serve? Does "faith healing" lead to false and unrealistic hopes? Does avoidance of the subject or criticism of faith healers show little faith? Fortunately, space permits only the raising of the question.

But "faith" and "healing" can also be approached from an entirely different perspective, one touched upon in our reflections on the Old Testament lesson for Trinity Sunday. We distinguish between the saving acts of God (Exodus, conquest, incarnation, cross, resurrection) and his providential acts (creation, preservation, health, wealth, etc.). That distinction is a good and useful one. But it is also good to remember that the saving and the providential acts come from the same God, that the providential acts come from the God whom we have come to know through his saving acts, and that, finally, his providential acts are exactly what we might expect from his track record. Why not call him Lord! (v.6)

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