

Holy Textures

Meeting Jesus in Matthew, Mark, Luke and John.
Short, easy to use, faith-provoking insights.



Luke 7:1-10

It is crucial for our understanding of the Good News to recognize that "Good News" is not just a proclamation. It is also a response. It requires not only a Jesus, but also a centurion to be realized. And the centurion is both the model and the challenge for you and me.



Year C

Epiphany 9

Not Used in 2013

*Sunday between March 4 and March 7 inclusive or
Sunday between March 3 and March 7 inclusive in a Leap Year
Not used if assigned date follows Ash Wednesday.*

May be replaced by Transfiguration Sunday if the assigned date is the last Sunday before Ash Wednesday.

OR

Pentecost NN

Not Used in 2013

*Sunday Between May 29 and June 4 Inclusive, if after Trinity Sunday.
Proper 4, Ordinary Time 9*

Read the passage at the bottom of this post: [Luke 7:1-10, The Message](#) or [Luke 7:1-10, The New Revised Standard Version \(NRSV\)](#).

Click [here](#) for an easy to print or email Adobe PDF version of this note.

Sermon by the Rev. Dr. George Hermanson, ". "

Malina and Rohrbaugh offer interesting background on this unnamed centurion (Pages 252-253. See footnote below. And check this [Wikipedia article](#) for more details.):

The centurion was the backbone of the Roman army. Each legion was made up of sixty centuries, each commanded by a centurion. He was a veteran soldier and had a position of prestige - he was paid about fifteen times as much as an ordinary soldier - as well as authority. His cuirass (chest armor of tough molded leather), transverse-plumed helmet, and wooden baton identify him as a centurion.

Luke does not specify whether the centurion in question was an Israelite or non-Israelite. There were in fact Israelites who served in the Roman army in various ranks. ... The fact that he built a synagogue with no mention of a temple in the region would suggest an Israelite lineage.

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As an officer representing Rome, the centurion would often broker imperial resources for the local population. In this case, he has done so by building a synagogue and thus is recognized as a patron by the village elders.

This story provides an interesting glimpse into the social dynamics of Jesus' time.

First, notice that the centurion - a man of high status and authority in Capernaum - can, and does, value a person of low status - his slave. This is not necessarily unusual as it would be highly honourable for a patron to publicly demonstrate that he has been well-served. Just as honour would require a patron to punish a slave who has ill-served him.

Second, notice how first the centurion sends "some Jewish elders," and then "some friends." The friends are of the same social rank as the centurion, whereas the elders are beholden to - and below - the centurion.

The elders are given the more onerous task of finding Jesus, begging a favour of him, and bringing him near the centurion's house. They do the work one would never ask friends to do.

The friends do the work that only friends can do: describe their friend's social status and authority, and then describe where their friend locates Jesus in rank and authority.

Aside: And note the odd reference to the elders as "Jewish." What else could such elders be but Jewish? Adding this detail suggests that Luke is clearly writing to an audience unfamiliar with Israelite society. It is also an example of how Romans used "Judean" which means those who lived in the province of Judah, to refer to all Israelites. See my note, ["It's Judeans Not Jews"](#) for more on the tragic history of this misunderstanding and mistranslation of the original Greek text of the New Testament.

Third, notice the amazing - no, miraculous - reversal of social status that is characteristic of Jesus' ministry.

Jesus himself is born of low status in Israelite society - the son of a carpenter (and with plenty of gossip about Mary being pregnant before they were married; about Joseph not being Jesus' actual father), from a no-name hamlet in the back hills of Israel.

And yet, Jesus has been gaining public honour and acclaim as a healer, teacher, and holy man.

In part, this public honour is ascribed to Jesus precisely because he acts outside of the norms of behaviour for his birth status. And precisely because he relates to others outside of the norms of their status. He eats with sinners and tax collectors! He speaks with outcasts! He touches dead bodies and those with leprosy! He commands the spirits of the wind and the sea!

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But Jesus is not the only one who can see - and act - beyond social norms.

The centurion is also an astute observer who is not distracted by social status.

Despite Jesus' low birth status, the centurion recognizes Jesus' authority: "only speak the word, and let my servant be healed."

And the centurion also publically affirms Jesus having a higher social status than himself: "Lord, ... I am not worthy to have you come under my roof."

Jesus, correctly and honourably, acknowledges this convention-breaking tribute: "I tell you, not even in Israel have I found such faith."

And remember that in the Bible, "faith" implies a relationship of trust and loyalty and not merely correct ideas about Jesus.

And finally, notice that the slave is found in good health without Luke reporting that Jesus did or said anything other than acknowledging the centurion's faith.

Could this be because "miracles" in the Bible are primarily about restoring right relationships? And the centurion's actions place him - and therefore his entire household - in right relationship with Jesus?

How is this story Good News?

It is crucial for our understanding of the Good News to recognize that "Good News" is not just a proclamation. It is also a response.

It requires not only a Jesus, but also a centurion to be realized.

And the centurion is both the model and the challenge for you and me.

How capable - and courageous - are you and I at being able to recognize where, and in whom, the Good News is being proclaimed and enacted today - no matter what their social status is? No matter how respectable and acceptable?

Will Jesus find such faith in us? In our congregation?

Ouch.

David Ewart,
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Note: Historical background information is primarily from Bruce Malina and Richard Rohrbaugh, Social Science Commentary on the Synoptic Gospels (see link below), pages 252-253.

* [Link to Amazon.com Bibliography for Bruce Malina, Richard Rohrbaugh, et. al.](#), Social Science Commentary on ... The Synoptic Gospels; The Gospel of John; The Book of Acts; The Letters of Paul; The Book of Revelation; and others.

Luke 7:1-10 (NRSV)

¹ After Jesus had finished all his sayings in the hearing of the people, he entered Capernaum. ² A centurion there had a slave whom he valued highly, and who was ill and close to death. ³ When he heard about Jesus, he sent some Jewish elders to him, asking him to come and heal his slave. ⁴ When they came to Jesus, they appealed to him earnestly, saying, "He is worthy of having you do this for him, ⁵ for he loves our people, and it is he who built our synagogue for us." ⁶ And Jesus went with them, but when he was not far from the house, the centurion sent friends to say to him, "Lord, do not trouble yourself, for I am not worthy to have you come under my roof; ⁷ therefore I did not presume to come to you. But only speak the word, and let my servant be healed. ⁸ For I also am a man set 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 slave, 'Do this,' and the slave does it." ⁹ When Jesus heard this he was amazed at him, and turning to the crowd that followed him, he said, "I tell you, not even in Israel have I found such faith." ¹⁰ When those who had been sent returned to the house, they found the slave in good health.

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Luke 7:1-10 (The Message)

¹ When he finished speaking to the people, he entered Capernaum. ² A Roman captain there had a servant who was on his deathbed. He prized him highly and didn't want to lose him. ³ When he heard Jesus was back, he sent leaders from the Jewish community asking him to come and heal his servant. ⁴ They came to Jesus and urged him to do it, saying, "He deserves this. ⁵ He loves our people. He even built our meeting place."

⁶ Jesus went with them. When he was still quite far from the house, the captain sent friends to tell him, "Master, you don't have to go to all this trouble. I'm not that good a person, you know. I'd be embarrassed for you to come to my house, ⁷ even embarrassed to come to you in person. Just give the order and my servant will get well. ⁸ I'm a man under orders; I also give orders. I tell one soldier, 'Go,' and he goes; another, 'Come,' and he comes; my slave, 'Do this,' and he does it."

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⁹ Taken aback, Jesus addressed the accompanying crowd: "I've yet to come across this kind of simple trust anywhere in Israel, the very people who are supposed to know about God and how he works." ¹⁰ When the messengers got back home, they found the servant up and well.

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