

Luke 7 v 1-10 The Centurion's Servant

I'd like you to raise a hand this morning if you like being told what to do. Which of us would describe ourselves willingly as being someone under authority? But of course, we all are. We often resent it when the Government tells us what to do, but we don't have much choice. Maybe Brexit is about freedom from Brussels bureaucrats telling us what to do? Yet we have never really experienced being a conquered nation with foreign soldiers patrolling our streets. In the last war, we escaped the experience of most of Europe.

In Jesus day, the population of Israel were quite used to the Roman presence and they certainly neither liked nor accepted it. Some became freedom fighters. The Galilee region in particular was a hotbed of rebellion. Others simply longed for the promised Messiah to come and liberate them, throwing the Romans out. The Roman soldiers were, like foot soldiers everywhere, often brutal and arbitrary. If a soldier told you to carry his pack for a mile, you were legally obliged to do it. If you were watching a crucifixion procession, you could be grabbed at no notice to carry the heavy cross beam. If a condemned man was brought in, Roman soldiers were quite entitled to abuse and make fun of him.

The Romans believed that their gods protected the Empire. Their rule was that subject peoples must obey Roman law, pay taxes to Caesar, and then they could keep their religious practices. Caesar was the only god who mattered and his image appeared on all the coins. The Romans were the power in the land of Palestine. The Chief Priest and his family could rule their little religious empire so long as there was no hint of insurrection against Rome. Pilate only agreed to Jesus execution because of the charge of treason against Rome – claiming to be a King. Until that charge was made, Pilate was just not interested.

Where would a Centurion fit into this? Centurions were the backbone of the Roman Army, experienced soldiers who had risen through the ranks and become noticed for their courage, loyalty and leadership qualities. They had considerable power, being in sole charge of anything from 100 to 1000 men. They were paid about 5000denarii a year – up to 20 x what a foot soldier would earn. Centurion was not so much a rank as a class within the military structure. Normally the best of the best were chosen after 16 years army service. It is never easy to hold a senior rank in an occupying army. You must maintain discipline among rough soldiers who don't wish to be there and you must maintain an uneasy relationship with a foreign population who don't want you there. You are accountable to senior officers for keeping the lid on the feelings of the local populace.

When I worked briefly in Nigeria I met a few ex-pats who respected the locals, and a great many who saw them as ignorant savages who were lucky to have the Brits to civilise them – and our Company was there to build roads, not to conquer. Despite this there was some resentment against foreign companies. The Centurion in our story has power and authority, but he has a genuine interest in the local people. He actually gets on rather well with them. While not totally sharing their faith, he respects it and has paid to build them a synagogue. It was well built. I've seen its

foundations – they are **still there today**. Not all Centurions were Romans. This man maybe drawn from other parts of the Empire. He obeys orders and gives them, but he has discovered that **the power of Rome is useless against sickness and death**. His house servant lies dying and, for all his authority, he is powerless to help. **He recognises that Jesus power and authority are greater than his own**. So he sends **the synagogue elders** to ask for Jesus' help. They will do it because they owe him big time! But their attitude **is not what he intended**. They say that the Centurion deserves Jesus' help because of what he has done. The Centurion is very clear that he does **NOT deserve** help, so he **sends friends** to set the message straight. It's another example of his **consideration for Jewish feelings**. He knows that a good Jew would not enter a Gentile house. Only twice does Jesus recognise "Faith greater than that found in Israel" A Syro-Phoenician woman and this Roman Centurion.

This man shows a remarkable **balance of authority and humility** – qualities not often found together, but shown supremely by **Jesus in Gethsemane** when he asserts that he could command five legions of angels to rescue him, yet submits his will to his Father. **Here Jesus has earned the respect of a man who had earned the respect of Rome**

When we look at Jesus, we see a **gentle man of love and compassion**. This is the aspect of him which is most often presented to us. The **Centurion sees a man of strength, power and authority**. He understands what it means to give orders and have them instantly obeyed. He knows it because he is used to obeying orders given to him. Many of us are please to accept **Jesus as our Saviour and friend**. We try to live to his standards of love and compassion, as we should. **But do we accept him as Lord?** Do we realise that Jesus has power and authority greater than the Roman Empire or any empire that ever has existed or will ever exist? He alone has power over life, death and immortality. So he is not someone whom we can cosily fit into our pattern of life, **moulding him to suit our particular needs**. He is the Lord to be obeyed. **We cannot turn to him to endorse what we already think**. Obedience to Jesus as Lord means that our ideas and preconceptions must always be moulded to his commands. How does he command that we use our time? Do we submit that to him daily? How does he command that we use our money and resources? Or do we feel we can do as we wish with it? What of our talents and abilities? How does he command that we use those?

Do you remember when letters were signed "Your Obedient Servant"? The writer was rarely any of those things! Yet it might be a fitting way to sign off our prayers. The Centurion, I am sure, became Jesus obedient servant after his experience of Jesus authority, because he could see an authority greater than his own. Jesus IS Lord!