

HOMILY ON THE FOURTH SUNDAY OF PENTECOST

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Sunday, July 5, 2020

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, One God. Amen.

Today on the 4th Sunday after Pentecost we listened to the Gospel reading of the Centurion and the paralysed servant.

In the Roman army, a centurion was equivalent to a middle-ranking officer in today's armies. Centurions had to be literate, as he had to be able to read written orders.

He had to have connections in the form of letters of recommendation. And he had to be at least 30 years of age and have served in the military for a few years. This meant that he was a man of standing and courage in Roman society. Centurions are mentioned several times in the scriptures, where they are highly spoken of.

One of those centurions mentioned in scriptures was Saint Longinus the Centurion. He was the centurion who stood at the cross and who said: "Truly this was the Son of God!" (Matt. 27:54).

Then there is Cornelius the Centurion of the Italian regiment. He was the one who was instructed by God to send for Peter. And when Peter arrived, he became the first official non-Jewish Christian when the Holy Spirit fell upon him, and those with him, and Peter baptised them all.

In today's reading, we hear about another special Centurion. In all the gospels, this is the only passage where it is recorded that Christ marvelled in a positive manner. The only other time that Christ marvelled is in His hometown of Nazareth at the unbelief of its inhabitants.

The reason why Christ marvelled in this short passage is because of the centurion's faith. Christ tells us *"Assuredly, I say to you, I have not found such great faith, not even in Israel!"*.

The attitude of the Centurion was not one which was normally observed in a man of his status. For many Romans, slaves were considered nothing more than objects. Once they had served their purpose they were replaced by another slave. But the Centurion really cared for this particular servant who was paralysed. Here we see a man filled with love and compassion for his fellow man.

Saint Luke also tells us the story of this Centurion, albeit with some additional information. (Luke 7:1-10) In Saint Luke's gospel reading, the Centurion's faith and humility are such that he does not even feel worthy to approach Christ himself.

He asked his Jewish Elder friends to approach Christ on his behalf. After all, he knows that he is approaching the Son of God, and his humility keeps him from being presumptuous.

In today's gospel reading of Saint Matthew, the centurion begins by addressing Christ as "Lord". This is an incredibly significant title from somebody who is in command of a Roman garrison, especially when considering that the Romans are the rulers of the subjugated Jewish people.

This was even before the Apostle Peter tells Jesus (Matt. 16:16) *"You are the Christ, the Son of the living God."* In Luke's version where it is not the centurion himself but rather his Jewish Elder friends who initiate the conversation with Christ, the Jewish Elder friends do not call Him Lord, they seem oblivious to who Christ is.

"And when they came to Jesus, they begged Him earnestly, saying that the one for whom He should do this was deserving, 'for he loves our nation, and has built us a synagogue.'" (Luke 7:4) God has obviously been working in the centurion's heart, filling him with true faith and revealing His Son to him.

The Jewish elders are extremely impressed with what the centurion has done for them. He is a great benefactor and has built them a synagogue. In their mind, the Centurion knows that he considers the Jews superior to him and that they are God's chosen people.

Therefore, the Centurion seems so deserving in the eyes of the Jewish elders. Christ sees something else completely. He sees that the Centurion has great qualities of the heart; that he has faith, love, compassion, and humility.

God is always concerned with our hearts, with our true spiritual state. God is not interested in our activities, achievements, and successes unless they are the fruit of showing love for Him and our fellow human beings.

We can and should try to accomplish good works. Paul says, "*For no other foundation can anyone lay than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ.*" (Cor. 3:11)

If our foundation is to impress others, even our own parents, if it is to win the praise and admiration of our peers, if it is to establish our reputation or any foundation other than Christ, then this will be very temporary indeed.

While the centurion's Jewish friends were most impressed with the synagogue that he built them, the centurion's love and compassion for his servant who lay suffering, his great humility in not even feeling worthy to have Christ under his roof, and his faith that Christ could heal his servant with a word, are what has come down to us and every generation for the last 2000 years.

The synagogue that was built has long ceased to be, but we still listen to this parable of the Centurion.

God has given us everything we need to allow us to grow and develop in the image of Christ, within the fullness of the Orthodox Church. He has placed His image within each of us and grants us His grace to allow that which He has placed within us to develop into fullness through Theosis in His Church.

However, we must always strive to be very careful in not becoming complacent and comfortable with our Christian way of life, somehow assuming that now that we are members of the Church, now that we have found the true Church, we can afford to relax and sit back.

The whole point of having access to all the treasures of the Orthodox Church, our heritage, is for us to make use of those treasures. And to use those treasures wisely. We must partake in the life of the Church; we must become witnesses to Christ.

If we think we are God's children just because we are privileged to be born into a certain race, into a certain church, then that would not be Christian, it would be racist.

As John the Baptist said to the Jews when the Jews claimed to be the children of Abraham, *"For I say to you that God is able to raise up children to Abraham from these stones."* (Luke 3:8)

Christ never denied the fact that the Jewish people were the chosen race of God, but all through the gospels, we see that Christ presents non-Jewish people as models for the Jewish people to emulate.

Today Christ tells us that the Centurion has greater faith than any in Israel and then he tells His people the Jews *"And I say to you that many will come from east and west, and sit down with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven. But the sons of the kingdom will be cast out into outer darkness,"*

Just being a member of the Church is not enough. Showing up once a month halfway through the Divine Liturgy is not enough. We must allow our hearts to be united to Christ.

In the same manner, Christ said that He would establish His Church as a real and tangible body founded upon the teachings and blood of the Apostles and saints and that the gates of Hades would not prevail against her. The Orthodox Church is us.

The centurion's faith in Christ was not based on the promise of seeing a miracle. He did not say "if you heal my servant, I will believe in you." His was a simple faith that Christ was God and that God could accomplish anything.

The Jews continuously asked for a sign and Christ said to them (Matt 12:39-40) *"An evil and adulterous generation seeks after a sign, and no sign will be given to it except the sign of the prophet Jonah. For as Jonah was three days in the belly of the great fish, so will the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth."*

What we need is faith in the resurrected Christ, not in signs. We must open our eyes and see that all of life is a miracle. We live in a modern world where everything can be explained with science and reasoning, but we forget that all of life is a miracle that is far beyond our comprehension.

The faith of the centurion was based upon the true humility that comes from understanding that all of creation is a miracle far beyond our grasp.

The author of all of creation stood before him; and the centurion knew very well that Christ could heal his much-loved servant. But he, the centurion, felt not worthy enough to even stand in His presence.

Through this great gift of faith which he demonstrated, he showed the entire Jewish people and indeed all of us, that there is no true faith without humility.

For St. Gregory of Nazianzus, the centurion's faith and approach to the Lord provide an example for us all: "Wherefore we must purify ourselves first, and then approach this converse with the Pure...be like the Centurion who would seek for healing, but would not, through a praiseworthy fear, receive the Healer into his house".

"Let each one of us also speak so, as long as he is still uncleansed, and is a Centurion still, commending many in wickedness, and serving in the army of Caesar, the World-ruler of those who are being dragged down, and saying: 'I am not worthy that thou shouldest enter under my roof'".

Amen.