

Jesus and people of other faiths (2)

Matthew 8:5-13

⁵When Jesus had entered Capernaum, a centurion came to him, asking for help.

⁶"Lord," he said, "my servant lies at home paralyzed and in terrible suffering."

⁷Jesus said to him, "I will go and heal him."

⁸The centurion replied, "Lord, I do not deserve to have you come under my roof. But just say the word, and my servant will be healed. ⁹For 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."

¹⁰When Jesus heard this, he was astonished and said to those following him, "I tell you the truth, I have not found anyone in Israel with such great faith. ¹¹I say to you that many will come from the east and the west, and will take their places at the feast with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven. ¹²But the subjects of the kingdom will be thrown outside, into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth."

¹³Then Jesus said to the centurion, "Go! It will be done just as you believed it would." And his servant was healed at that very hour.

2. Jesus and the Roman Centurion

A Centurion leads a unit of eighty men in the Roman army. The soldier who appears in the Gospels lives in the Galilean lakeside village of Capernaum, where Jesus based himself after leaving Nazareth over his controversial synagogue sermon. We're in Galilee of the Gentiles, where a mixture of people of different faiths and races had coexisted for centuries. Different tribes maintained their own language, culture and beliefs. Capernaum was a crossroad town of trading routes between Syria and Palestine, the interior and the Mediterranean, where taxes were collected from passing traders, a prosperous place. So it's not surprising there was a garrison there. It was a congenial place that colonial soldiers would have considered a decent posting. Their leader – remember the Romans were not popular with the natives – evidently made an effort in a 'hearts and minds' campaign, According to Matthew and Luke he was well thought of by the Jewish population of this cosmopolitan area. Both record his good-will, funding the construction of a synagogue. What might make him do this? With Roman Law and the force of arms behind him, he's have needed to do nothing extra, as the symbol law and order around town, backed by eighty men.

As a ranking officers he'd come from good social background and be educated. It wasn't unusual for such people to take an interest in the lives and beliefs of those their subjects. There are clear references to this in Acts where Paul is brought before Felix, Governor of Caesarea, then King Agrippa. Felix had a Jewish wife, though he himself would be subject to Roman State gods. Agrippa was a grandson of Herod, whose people converted superficially to Judaism to rule over the Jews, as Roman client Kings. They came from Idumean stock. They were Edomites - Semitic cousins, from trans-Jordanian Sinai, with beliefs in several Gods, El, Baal, Kaus, Asherah. Herod Agrippa was raised and educated in Rome, thus knowledgeable about imperial Roman, Greek, Jewish and family tribal beliefs so it's no wonder Paul acknowledges Agrippa's religious expertise, in opening his trial defence.

So it would not be difficult to imagine a Roman centurion, perhaps from Italy or North Africa, making himself at home in a religiously diverse place, taking an interest in native Judaism, aware that the ruling Herods, of whose local police force he was a leader, had Judaism in their religious background. It would be in his interest to be knowledgeable and sympathetic. It would help in maintaining law and order. As

a public official he'd be obliged to pay homage to the gods of the Roman State, acknowledge the divinity of the Emperor even if he didn't believe in it. He's a man who knows all about authority, and how to manage it. As a soldier, his was devotion to Jupiter and Mars the gods of war, and Minerva, goddess of wisdom, medicine and science and war. It was not unusual for the colonial armies to absorb into their worship practice the cults of local gods, in Syria and Egypt. Beliefs in many gods from different religious systems as deemed expedient, was normal. Did this centurion entertain the idea of assimilating belief in Yahweh, God of the Hebrews into his faith portfolio, I wonder? There is another possibility.

Among early non-Jewish Christian converts were Roman subjects disillusioned with this kind of religion. They read philosophers' criticisms of religious superstition, or could see how morally bankrupt were the myths and legends associated with the Gods. For them Judaism with its minimalist, elusive divinity, and strong practical, consistent moral code, seemed to uphold human dignity, value integrity, justice and compassion. They might, if they knew the language, attend the synagogue, listen to scripture read, join in debate, especially where Greek was used by Jewish communities. Conversion to Judaism was unheard of.

It was followers of Messiah Jesus who broke down all barriers of ethnicity, religion and culture in God's name. The Gospel story of the healing of the Centurion's servant illustrates something that began with Jesus himself & flourished with his apostles. Remember the story of Cornelius in Acts? He was also a soldier, a devout Jewish sympathiser who confesses Jesus and is baptized after hearing the Gospel from Peter. It's a turning point in the apostles' mission. But precedent was already set by Jesus.

In the Gospel story Jesus is approached respectfully by the Centurion (through his servants in Luke), not with a command, but a request to heal his paralysed servant. He doesn't expect a home visit. Jews and Roman's just didn't mix. But he's heard enough good news about Jesus the healer to be confident in his authority to say the word and make it happen. He recognises himself as unworthy in Jewish eyes of a home visit. He humbles himself as a man in power by asking this favour, while recognising in Jesus a measure of authority which even he, as a commander of soldiers doesn't possess. Jesus is willing to speak to him without any conditions laid down. Jewish leaders, leaders, anxious not to compromise their ritual purity in their

dealings with this Gentile, was act differently. He expresses his admiration for the Centurion's faith, his willingness to trust Jesus' authority and ability to heal. We don't need to presume he was a gentile Jewish sympathiser or that he and Jesus had any belief in common. Jesus doesn't quizzed him about his motives or the content of his belief. He sees a man reaching out, from concern and compassion on behalf of someone else - someone inferior, a servant. Servants and slaves had little or no status - disposable assets whose welfare was their own business, and their business was meeting their master's need. But here's a master anxious for his underling's health, willing to go out of his way to get help for him.

St John tells a story about a Capernaum civil servant, whose son is dying. He may well mean a Roman official. He travels to Cana seeking Jesus, asking healing for his son. He is desperate, forgets protocol, begs Jesus to come to his house. Jesus exhorts him to believe, and it will happen. He believes and it happens at the very time this exchange occurs. He takes Jesus at his word, albeit in a different manner to Matthew and Luke. John is making a different point about the need to trust Jesus.

For Matthew and Luke, here is an encounter between two worlds of faith Roman and Jewish - one the realm of control and power, with gods of every kind invoked and placated according to need, the other the realm of simplicity, freedom, justice, truth and openness. One is the realm of images, symbols and rituals, the other defies definition, abhors all representation and imagery, such that it's capable of being deemed atheistic by those of other religions. But trust is already there in this man. He's one that Gospel hearers might not think would have that kind of trust. He's acknowledged by Jesus for the good-will his trust expresses.

There's no possibility of exchange about faith and belief based on saying 'we're right and you're mistaken' or 'our religion is superior to yours'. The only place where inter-faith engagement and dialogue can begin, is at a recognised common points of human need - the need for healing, justice, a better world. The need to recognise that one's own power and authority, beliefs are inadequate, unfit for purpose, 'Lord I believe, help my unbelief', The need to recognise that the one worthy of worship is above and beyond all that we are or can conceive of. In other words, dialogue about faith can start wherever there is humility and awareness of our true need.