

**SECOND SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST - 2<sup>nd</sup> June 2013 7.00am Eucharist 8.00am Eucharist 9.30am Solemn Eucharist** Readings: 1 Kings 18:20-21 (22-29) 30-39; Psalm 96; Galatians 1:1-12; Luke 7:1-10

Recently Pope Francis created a bit of a stir for saying that all people, even atheists, are redeemed by Christ's sacrifice. He invited everyone, whether they had faith or not, to come together at the place of doing good works. As would be expected, his remarks drew both praise and criticism. Praise from those who were encouraged by what they saw as a new inclusivism; criticism from those who felt the Pope was watering down the Christian faith and that he was guilty of syncretism, the belief that basically all religions lead to God.

How much faith does one have to have before God accepts us? What does it mean to have faith? If anything, the story of Jesus and the centurion is a story of faith. This officer of the Roman Empire has such trust in the ability of Jesus to heal his slave that he sends a message to tell Jesus not to bother coming. "Just say the word and my slave will be healed." We say a variant on those words before receiving the Lord's body and blood in Holy Communion. And the reason the centurion has such faith in the authority of Jesus to heal is because he himself has a pretty good idea of the meaning of authority. He is under authority and he also has authority over others.

Jesus remarks to the crowds, "I tell you, not even in Israel have I found such faith" (Luke 7:9). It's hard for us to appreciate what a provocative thing this was for Jesus to say. If we take the view of most scholars that Luke's Gospel in its final form was written in the closing decades of the first century C.E., and therefore some time after the fall of Jerusalem to the Roman armies in the year 70, it becomes more apparent why this was such a provocative thing for Jesus to say. Roman control and oppression was still a reality. Luke's original readers would not look favourably on a centurion being portrayed in a good light.

Is this the reason Luke included it in his Gospel? Centurions were not usually seen as examples of charity or goodness. *This is one of the men responsible for Israel's oppression.* This man is the enemy. Yet the man sends delegates who happened to be Jewish elders. That would be highly unlikely if not impossible if they didn't hold this man in very high regard. They tell Jesus the centurion is one who is "worthy" and who "loves our people" having built their synagogue for them. Many prefer a world in which people can be labelled as either goodies or baddies and in which it's crystal clear who is in, who is out, who is saved and who is not. That's simple and predictable.

Just as some were surprised at Pope Francis' remarks about atheists, so Luke's original readers would no doubt have also been surprised by a centurion who demonstrated both faith and good works. Jesus himself commends the man's faith. Yet we have no evidence that he became a follower of Jesus. He may have later but at this point he doesn't fall down on his knees and confess Jesus as Messiah. He doesn't even want to meet him. All he does is to see in Jesus a special kind of authority that he both recognises and needs at this point in his life.

Maybe that's a start. When we recognise our own insufficiency and also recognise an authority outside our own - something which is becoming increasingly difficult in our narcissistic and ego-

driven age – then we're on the path to a relationship with Jesus. This man asks for help because he recognises his own insufficiency.

Now it would be strange indeed if there weren't someone here today who doesn't have friends, family members, or neighbours or work colleagues who either don't go to church, or who aren't very strong in their faith or who have no faith at all. In fact I'd say everyone here is in that position. Does God not love them? Can God not use such a person to do good and even to demonstrate faith? Or is God unable to work in someone's life simply because that person doesn't have sufficient faith or doesn't even believe God exists? Jesus said God sends his sun and rain on good and bad alike. St Paul said to the Athenians, "In him we live and move and have our being"; as even some of your own poets have said, 'We too are his offspring'" (Acts 17:28).

As we hear this story today, can we not see them as loved? Can we also perhaps be challenged that at times we may have looked down on them, failing to see them as God sees them, i.e., as beloved? Maybe we can ask God for discernment to see when, where and how God is at work in their lives. Maybe we can ask God how we can be used to point the way to him. Jesus said faith the size of a mustard seed can work great things. How can God use us to nurture and water those mustard seeds of faith?

Another thing to remember is that faith is not our achievement; it's also the gift of God. St Paul says to the Ephesians, "For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God" (Eph. 2:8). God can use us to be a voice of encouragement rather than condemnation. How many people whose ties to the church are tenuous at best have been turned off by the judgemental behaviours and attitudes of Christians?

Several years ago I was preparing a couple for marriage. The groom was a man I knew from his association with the parish I was serving. He had been brought up in a home where his parents deliberately sent him to a school where SRE would not be taught; such was their determination to rear their children without any religious influence. He shared with me how despite his upbringing he always had a sense God existed. One day he knocked on the door of the rectory when my predecessor at that parish lived there, and asked to be baptised. He attended a Bible study group at the parish during my early years there then subsequently moved to Sydney to lecture at the university.

He had a brilliant mind and he and I would easily spend up to three hours talking about religion and politics and a whole lot of other things. Later he developed doubts and questions about his faith. Nevertheless, he eventually asked me to conduct his wedding. His fiancée was an atheist. During the interviews she shared with me her reasons for not believing in God. She described a deity of law and vengeance and retribution who slaughtered his enemies and took delight in punishing wrongdoing: a caricature of God. After she finished, I said to her, "You know, I don't believe in the God you've just described either." The so-called 'God' many reject bears no resemblance to the God revealed in Jesus Christ.

There are many such people in our world. They can't be divided into believers and unbelievers, goodies and baddies. Pray that God open our eyes, hearts and minds to be as welcoming as Jesus

was to this centurion. Pray that God would show us the ways he's at work far beyond the confines of our church or faith and that the God who revealed himself in a man hanging on a cross continues to show us the places where we don't expect God to be.

Pray that God keeps reminding us that he is the God of surprises. God always delights in surprising us. I read during the week a remark I'd heard previously from an English bishop who visited Australia last year and who said from his observation the Australian church is dying of boredom. The reference to that remark was made in the context of a discussion on social media of the Q and A programme last week on which Bishop Gene Robinson appeared. One thing that can be said about him is he's not boring. Have we become so bound by routine that we've forgotten God is a God of surprises?

St Luke frequently sees those on the margins of Israel, those on the outside like the Good Samaritan or the Samaritan leper who was the only one of ten who returned to give thanks after he was healed or Zacchaeus the despised tax collector *and* this Roman centurion as those who are singled out by Jesus for special attention. How is God bringing those on the margins to himself today? How are you and I working as co-labourers with God in that?

God give us the faith to let Jesus say the word so that we as his body, his church may be healed of all that hinders our effectiveness in reaching out to those on the margins.

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