

The faith of the centurion

⁵ When Jesus had entered Capernaum, a centurion came to him, asking for help. ⁶ 'Lord,' he said, 'my servant lies at home paralysed, suffering terribly.'

⁷ Jesus said to him, 'Shall I come and heal him?'

⁸ The 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. ⁹ For 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.'

¹⁰ When Jesus heard this, he was amazed and said to those following him, 'Truly I tell you, I have not found anyone in Israel with such great faith. ¹¹ I 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. ¹² But the subjects of the kingdom will be thrown outside, into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.'

¹³ Then Jesus said to the centurion, 'Go! Let it be done just as you believed it would.' And his servant was healed at that moment.

An opening question:

What are your first impressions of the centurion?

... It's a lovely story about faith and as we delve into it, we discover that it's also a good example of relational maturity and security.

From another angle... Luke also speaks of it, and he has a slightly different account for how the Centurion initially sent the request to Jesus. Luke has the Centurion asking some Jewish elders to go on his behalf and when that is successful and the Centurion is told Jesus is on the way, he sends some friends to say these things to Jesus. **(Luke 7:1-10)**

Q: Why do you think the Centurion stopped Jesus from coming into the house?

Supplement Q if needed: Is that feeling of unworthiness one that chimes with you?

Matthew doesn't focus on the Centurion's voice on being through others; in those days it was counted as being the sender's voice even if made through agents. We quickly notice that the Centurion felt unworthy to receive Jesus in his house but there are extra dimensions to this... (Some will have come up from q1)

Let's get a bit of background:

Did you know?

Centurions were an important part of the Roman army, leading companies of men, normally about one hundred, hence the name, but sometimes more. Their responsibilities varied according to their location and where they led a 'peacekeeping role' such as that here, it included their interaction with local leaders.

What sets this Centurion apart from the others is his compassion for his servant. A bond-slave to a Roman was a tool under Roman law. William Barclay shares that 'a Roman writer on estate management recommends the farmer to examine his implements every year and to throw out those which are old and broken, and to do the same with his slaves.'ⁱ

A Centurion, having military authority over his servants could easily apply the same principle and would typically send an old or injured servant away, normally without any form of pay or support and the freedom that came with being released was little comfort for those without family or friends to turn to. They could easily end up homeless and quickly die in poverty.

But not this Centurion!

It is easy to see his compassion, but a deeper look helps us to see that this Centurion had a deep understanding of relationships, is secure in who he is and, in a Jesus-like way, is prepared to go against protocols considered normal.

Protocol 1: Race Relations

The Centurion's role was to keep the peace in the area, maintaining Roman Rule of Law. To do this well the Centurion would need to have working relationships with the various community leaders, including the Jews.

In those times, that relationship was often strained – the dislike and distrust between Pontius Pilate and Herod is an example. Roman rulers had a distrust of the Jews because the Jews insisted on their own traditions and way of life that differed to other citizens of the world. For their part, the Sadducees tried to pacify the Roman rulers by collaborating with them, the political negotiators, and dealers. The Pharisees asserted the law of Moses as a healthy society, the Religious Order, and the zealots tried to disrupt Roman rule, the activists.

It is realistic to expect that the Centurion's advisors would tell him to exercise care and suspicion of Jewish motives, yet from Luke we find he had gained the respect of Jewish leaders. The Centurion went beyond the strict remit to make a connection of trust with those leaders.

Q: Does that sound Jesus-like to you and why?

Let's dig a little deeper. We've already considered that the Centurion says, 'I do not deserve to have you come under my roof' from the viewpoint of feeling unworthy but the Centurion also understood Mosaic law.

Two examples:

- John 18:28, on the leaders taking Jesus to the palace of the Roman governor.
- Acts 10:28, Peter's revelation.

The Centurion did not use his authority to go against Mosaic law, but applied a mature, humble and unfearful attitude in his relationships.

Modern Relational Challenges:

In our modern world 'where self-promotion has become increasingly normalized'ⁱⁱ we are familiar with a culture of individuals and interest groups promoting the image they want others to see. Aided by the use of social media, that presentation includes instant reactions and opinions to gather support to create a court of public opinion, which adds to the erosion of trust in institutions and creates a society where relationships between people groups are framed by suspicion and fear. Two examples from this week are the media furore around an edited photo by Princess Kate and the news of MP Lee Anderson who 'was suspended as a Conservative MP after refusing to apologise for claims Islamists had "control" of London Mayor Sadiq Khan'ⁱⁱⁱ and has now joined a rival political party.

Q's:

Are there people characteristics or groups that cause unease or fear in you?

If you had to engage with them, what lessons from the Centurion could you apply?

Is there a people group in your local area with whom you would love the church to reach? How might the church begin to engage with them?

Protocol 2: Establishing Authority

The Centurion has a very mature view of authority and, instead of promoting his own authority, he describes himself as 'a man under authority' (v9). Biblical scholar Morris describes the culture of the Roman army as its officers conducting the authority of the emperor, so they are both under the emperor's authority and when giving orders they are obeyed because they are doing so with the emperor's authority.^{iv} This remains common to military institutions today. Uniformed officers are addressed as 'sir' or 'madam'. Did you know the salute is not directly for the person but for their rank as representing a higher authority, which in the UK is King Charles?

While the humility of the Centurion might again be the feature that stands out, it is his appropriate use of authority that can teach and challenge us.

Q: Do you understand yourself as both being under The Father's authority and carrying that authority into the world?

Q: How might the Centurion's example bring fresh insight to our relationships with others, especially as Jesus' people?

The Centurion applies that understanding of 'a man under authority' to Jesus, so displaying that the Centurion understood Jesus as acting under God's authority. Having that authority, the Centurion expected that Jesus would act in accordance with God's will.

Although Jesus does not answer the Centurion immediately but addresses the crowd first, let's include Jesus' answer in our considerations,

¹³ Then Jesus said to the centurion, 'Go! Let it be done just as you believed it would.' And his servant was healed at that moment.

It may have missed attention that In Matthew's account the Centurion simply states the facts to Jesus, and it is Jesus who asks the question, 'shall I come and heal him?' (v6&7).

Q: What desires stir up your heart to wanting to see Jesus Kingdom at work?

Q: What would you like him to do and what are you expecting of him?

Protocol 3: Establishing Superiority

Part of the difficulty in the relationship between Roman rulers and the Jewish leaders was that of the emperor stamping superiority over the vanquished peoples. Many Jewish leaders applied the same attitude as being superior to those they had religious authority over and the Gentile race.

Luke 18:9-14 examples this in Jesus' parable about the Pharisee and the Tax collector.

In our scripture we have Jesus turning to the crowd and warning against an attitude of superiority:

¹⁰ When Jesus heard this, he was amazed and said to those following him, 'Truly I tell you, I have not found anyone in Israel with such great faith. ¹¹ I 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. ¹² But the subjects of the kingdom will be thrown outside, into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.'

In Jesus' speech he points to the Gentiles invitation as well as Jews. See also **John 10:16**

Q: How might we apply this in our relationships, to invite others?

Q: Could you pray for those who do not accept Jesus as Lord, that they may be saved from being cast out?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, we praise you for who you are and your amazing grace in inviting us into your Kingdom. We praise you that you have authority over earth and heaven, and we recommit ourselves into your authority. Please help us to carry your authority with an assured calm and be a non-anxious presence in all our relationships. Lord, the people of this land desperately need your healing of salvation and so we faithfully invite you to come into the hearts and homes of our families and communities.

ⁱ William Barclay, *The New Daily Study Bible: The Gospel of Luke*, 3rd edn (Edinburgh: Saint Andrew Press, 2001), p.101.

ⁱⁱ Michael Smith, *The Psychology Behind Self-Aggrandizement* (Missouri: Self Esteem Generator, 2023) <[The Psychology Behind Self-Aggrandizement - Self-Esteem Generator \(selfesteemgenerator.com\)](https://selfesteemgenerator.com)> [accessed 12March 2024].

ⁱⁱⁱ Sam Francis, 'Lee Anderson: Ex-Tory MP defects to Reform UK', *BBC News*, 11 March 2024 < [Lee Anderson: Ex-Tory MP defects to Reform UK - BBC News](https://www.bbc.com/news/health-67890)> [Accessed 11 March 2024], (para. 2 of 13).

^{iv} Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, Reprinted (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), p.194.