

# FAITH that is really faith

## A Sermon by the Rev Ian Arnold

*"There are many who declare that a person is saved through faith; or as they say, if he or she merely has faith. But the majority of such people do not know what faith is. Some imagine it is mere thought; some that it is the acknowledgment of something which ought to be believed; others that it is the entire doctrine of faith which ought to be believed; and others that it is something different again. Thus in their mere knowledge of what faith is, they are mistaken; and as a consequence they are mistaken as to what saves a person.*

*Faith, however, is not mere thought; nor is it the acknowledgement of something that ought to be believed; nor is it a knowledge of all that constitutes the doctrine of faith. Nobody can be saved by such thought, acknowledgement or knowledge that cannot send down roots any deeper than thought.*

*Thought does not save anyone, but the life which they acquire to themselves in the world through what they learn of faith. Such life remains, but all thought that is not in keeping with the persons life dies away, even to the point of becoming nothing at all. In heaven, that which brings people into association with one another is their lives, not thoughts which are not related in any way to a persons life." (Arcana Caelestia, paragraph 2228.2-3)*

rom the gospel, friends, from Matthew chapter 8, verse 10:

*"When Jesus heard, He marvelled and said to those who followed, Assuredly I say to you, I have not found such great faith, not even in Israel!"*

That's Matthew 8, verse 10; and of course at that time, the Lord was talking to the crowd that had gathered around Him. There's no doubt there was a crowd around Him: it begins the chapter by saying that He had come down from the mountain, that's immediately after giving the Sermon on the Mount, and great multitudes followed Him.

When Jesus heard it, heard what the centurion had said, He marvelled. He said to those who followed: "Assuredly I say to you, I have not found such great faith, not even in Israel!"

Even as He said those words, its 99.9% certain that Jesus would have been aware of the impact that they had on the people who were around Him, many of whom of course would have been Jews. And many of them would have entertained the assumption that was ingrained with them: that by birth and as a birth-right they had access to the Kingdom of Heaven (however they understood that to be) in a way that no gentile would ever have. And here, straightaway afterwards, Jesus challenges this assumption. They've heard this, they would have been unhappy, they would have been murmuring, it would have caused consternation: "What is He saying this to a gentile for? This is not one of us! And yet He is saying He has not found so great a faith even amongst us!" So even perhaps they were affronted, and Jesus picked that up and went on to say, "I say to you that many will come from east and west and sit down with Abraham and Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven, but the sons of the kingdom will be cast into outer darkness." That's a slap in the face for them! "There will be weeping and gnashing of teeth."

Nobody has access to the kingdom of heaven by going to a particular church, or by

belonging to a particular faith. Nobody. You see, we can extrapolate from what Jesus is saying here a message for our day and age. It matters not what faith you've been brought up in or born into. It matters not what church you belong to. What matters is how vibrant and how living is the faith which you have, and which energises you! That's not to be missed as one of the key points highlighted, brought to our attention, and taught to us here. When Jesus heard what the centurion said, He marvelled and said to those who followed, "Assuredly I say to you, I have not found such great faith, not even in Israel!"

So far as assumptions are concerned friends, we too can make our assumptions, let's face it. When it comes to the Romans, what are your assumptions? That they were earthy people, worldly? That they were materialists; loved pleasure, and a good glass of wine? Archaeologists have dug up their houses for us; some of them certainly lived in splendour. But what are your assumptions of the Romans? And what are your assumptions of their soldiers? That they were monumental blockheads who simply followed orders, did what they were told, never thought for themselves? Perhaps it's true of some of them. But be careful, because we are into assumptions; and when we come to look at this centurion, and think about him and where he came from, even those assumptions have to be challenged or qualified as to just what it was that made a Roman soldier.

Certainly the centurion was an exception; he was an exception for two obvious reasons. One is he cared for those under his authority; he was a man who worried about, and had compassion for, those who served him. So let's not think of the Romans exclusively in terms of the brutality of the age, or in terms of the brutality which history is evidence of that they could commit. He was a man of tenderness, who like I say, cared and had compassion.

But as well as that, we learn something else of him, and that is that he was prepared to think outside the square. Why should he, a Roman (he was part of the occupying army, a relatively senior soldier) go and see this itinerant rabbi, this Hebrew, this preacher, who at that stage had hardly begun his public ministry? Why should he take the risk? He took a risk because he stepped outside convention, and he was prepared to seek healing and help where it might be found; hardly a monumental blockhead, but rather a man of insight and decency.

But more than that, he was a man who possessed a faith at which the Lord marvelled; and went on to say that He had not found such faith, not even in Israel, not even amongst his closest followers and disciples. We can take that as being read. He wouldn't have said what He said: "I have not found such great faith, and yet here I find it in a Roman soldier who you see to be a Gentile!" And we need now, friends, to start looking at what it was that made his faith so outstanding, which attracted this tremendous compliment from the Lord.

Well, so far as his faith was concerned, we do know this: that it was not based on book learning or long years of study. He wasn't a rabbi. He hadn't been brought up in some school of the rabbis. He had no Jewish background in the scriptures. He came to Jesus innocently, but wonderfully, to seek healing for his servant who was paralysed at home.

And friends, the first thing that I draw your attention to here is this: that faith is not alive just on the basis of long years of study, or book learning. That is not to deride or to undermine the purpose or the usefulness of reading and learning, growing an

understanding. But none of those things in themselves guarantee a living and vibrant faith. He obviously possessed something else, which like I say, was able to attract this incredible, unusual compliment from the Lord: "I have not found such great faith, not even in Israel!" What is it that he possessed?

I want you, friends, to go back into the words that he spoke when he came to Jesus: "Lord, I am not worthy that you should come under my roof, but only speak a word and my servant shall be healed. For I also am a man under authority." There are two things there that we tend to miss in our reading, and even the translation, of this particular part of the gospel.

Firstly, the word worthy, "I am not worthy", is not helpful. He actually said to Jesus: "I see that you are a man on another level", a man on another level. It makes you wonder whether he had been listening to the Sermon on the Mount, hearing Jesus speak on another level, recognising that Jesus orated differently to anybody else he had encountered so far; because that's what the Greek means. Our English has "I am not worthy". No! "I see that you are a man on another level, that you operate differently". What this opens up for us is this: that the centurion was tuned into the fact that life is not just about one physical, outer, natural level, but that life is multi-layered, multi-levelled, and that indeed there is a level, as epitomised in what he had seen of Jesus, there is a level that we might all even aspire to. That's the first thing.

And the second thing is this, when he talks about being a man under authority, what he is saying is this: "I know all about unerring obedience. I say to somebody Go and he goes; I say to somebody Come and he comes." And what he is saying there is this: "I know and can see that the higher needs always to be obeyed and carried out in the lower." And that changes what we so often, as it were, slide across when we read this episode. We've got to look at what this man was saying. He was talking about levels of our existence and also about authority and the need to recognise when authority should be obeyed. Wonderful! And Jesus was stunned, stunned at the insight. "When Jesus heard, He marvelled and said to those who followed, Assuredly I say to you, I have not found such great faith, not even in Israel!"

The centurion knew that life is not about doing as you please. The centurion knew that you ought to live life to the fullest, and in a spiritual way. We need to be prepared to look up to, and be subservient to, authority above ourselves. "I am a man under authority. I know what authority is all about; and I can see how it applies to my own inner discipline and the way I live my life." He had captured, you see, what faith is all about! And Jesus was incredulous. "I have not found such great faith, not even in Israel!"

The higher must always be, and take precedence before, the lower. The higher must always be observed, and carried out, in the lower. As we say in the Lords Prayer: "As in heaven, so upon the earth." The higher rules the lower. And the centurion got it, but nobody else had up to that point. And so the Lord commended him, because faith is a commitment and a resolve to live our lives from a higher authority, and more or less to live our lives unerringly to the best of our ability from a higher authority. "I know", said the centurion, "what authority is all about." And so it needs to be in the way we practice the things we subscribe to and say we believe in.

The centurions servant was paralysed, stuck, immobile. He had become dysfunctional. The centurion needed that person to be up and about if he was to carry out his duties as a senior soldier. Let's hone in to these words: "being stuck

and immobile", because often we get ourselves and recognise times and situations when we become stuck and immobile. Attitudes become stuck and immobile. We become stuck and fixed and immobile as if we can't move. Let's face it, relationships also become fixed and stuck and immobile. Our initiative to do new things, to get up and go about life, becomes such that we feel as if we can't do it. We're like the paralysed person.

What Jesus is doing here is inviting to re-examine what is the essence of faith. And when we look at it and see what it involves, then the sense of being fixed and stuck and immobile and unable to move certain parts of our life dissolves. If we truly have faith, in the very essence of faith, then all is well. The Lord doesn't even have to come to the place where the man is! He feels it from a distance. No wonder Jesus said that if you have faith as a grain of mustard seed, you shall say to this mulberry bush move there to here, and it will be uprooted and move. If you have faith as a grain of mustard seed, you shall say to this mountain move from here to there. Nothing will be impossible to you, not on the spiritual plane! Not when it comes to the challenges of life, particularly those times when we feel fixed, stuck, imprisoned, somehow rigidly ensconced, which is what that paralysis brings home to us. Have faith, and all will be restored, healed, ameliorated, set free again.

"When Jesus heard, He marvelled and said to those who followed, Assuredly I say to you, I have not found such great faith, not even in Israel! Then Jesus said to the centurion, Go your way. As you have believed, so let it be done for you! And the servant was healed that same hour."

AMEN.