

Hymns: **378** **“Father of everlasting grace”**
 387 **“Into a world of dark”**
 369 **“Baptise us with your spirit”**
 404 **“God’s spirit is in my heart”**

Readings: **1 Kings 8:20-24a & 41-43**
 Luke 7:1-10

“THE FOREIGNER”

The encounter between Jesus and the Roman centurion (like so much else in the Bible) raises questions that are as fresh as a new day. To understand it, it’s important to suspend the frailties of familiarity and make a real imaginative effort to get “inside” the story – there’s a lot going on in its inner recesses.

The centurion, variously described by the commentators (depending on their own military experience and social class) as the equivalent of a captain or a sergeant-major, would have commanded the local garrison. He would have proved his valour in war while, in this story, he displays his wisdom in times of peace. Building a synagogue for the Jewish population was bound to have improved community relations. The Romans allowed Jews to practice their religion throughout their Empire – for pragmatic reasons in the main. It was calculated to keep the people under control.

On this point, it’s worth noting a remark by Edward Gibbon, author of *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* when he wrote: “The various modes of religion which prevailed in the Roman world were all considered by the people to be equally true; by the philosopher to be equally false; and by the magistrate to be equally useful.”

The situation which the centurion would have had to manage was fraught with difficulty. The people around him would have been filled with resentment at best and threatening to erupt in violent displays of anger at worst. Everyone was sitting on a bomb that was waiting to explode. The Zealots were the IRA of their day. Riots had to be put down, their leaders captured and tortured before being thrown into prison. It was destined to lead to outright war just a few years after the death of Jesus. The Romans eventually had a stomach full and they brought in their heavy guns. They destroyed much of Jerusalem, including the magnificent Temple only recently built by King Herod. They drove the Jewish population into the far corners of the Mediterranean world – a diaspora from which they returned only in 1948.

So this centurion, who seems to have been such a nice man, was for all that, charged with onerous responsibilities which he might have had to implement at any moment.

To guess at the complexity of roles played by the biblical soldier, I found myself comparing members of the armed forces who served in Northern Ireland during “the

troubles". Over the years, I've known a fair few of them – officers and men. I've seen them at work on the streets of Belfast and in their dug-outs along the roads of County Fermanagh leading to Enniskillen. I've chatted to them in pubs and chapels this side of the water and in their quarters over in Ireland. The large majority of them are simple and honest men who tried to do their job as well as they could. Most of them had wives and families, liked football, kept allotments, walked their dogs and read their newspapers. Yet while on duty in Northern Ireland, they were hated, feared, spat at by a large swathe of the population. To these people, no-one represented the oppressor more than those soldiers. Republicans organised one act of violence after another in the Province and beyond it. In 1992 a bomb exploded across the road from us at Wesley's Chapel. The target was the Honourable Artillery Company but our windows were blown in (in all honesty, that did us a great service, they were horrible windows) and we've had an emergency plan and a whopping extra premium to pay on our insurance ever since. We are considered to live in a "terrorist zone".

The centurion, whatever his virtues, would have been a figure of opprobrium too – just like his British counterpart in our contemporary world. He was the public face of imperial Rome, the man responsible for keeping the people down and the taxes up. There's plenty of evidence that the Romans hated Jews (anti-Semitism wasn't born yesterday); and you can bet your life that the feelings were reciprocated.

On grounds of politics, religion, and race, Jesus had plenty of scope for inventing a reason to reject the advances being made on behalf of this soldier. The centurion belonged to a political system (the Roman Empire) that was deeply resented by the people of Judea. As far as religion went, the Jews were strictly monotheistic – one (and one only) God was central to their religious practices, while the Romans invented gods at will. And, as far as race is concerned, here was a Caucasian dealing with a man of Semitic ethnicity. Who could have been more different from each other than these two men? So we might have expected Jesus to take evasive action. The truth, however, is exactly the opposite.

We have to stop our narrative at this point and repeat the simple point that Jesus didn't, he did not, HE ABSOLUTELY DID NOT send the delegation packing. It's important to emphasise this point – it's a detail we pass over without thinking because of the number of times we've heard this story told. The radical nature of Jesus's readiness to receive the request of the centurion simply has to stir the soul even now, all these centuries later.

So Jesus turned on his heel. He faced the delegation. He nodded his readiness to act. It's what he did instinctually – someone's need was always his cue. And off he went to the centurion's home.

Aah ha! The centurion's home! Another detail that needs to be heard loud and clear. For observant Jews were not allowed to enter the homes of Gentiles. It's always clear, as clear as daylight, that Jesus considered that the law was made for men and women, to help them and give them some order and shape in their community and personal lives. The law as made for men and women, NOT people for the law. Jesus seems to be ready to ignore the law when a deed of mercy beckoned.

So off he set. Race and politics and religion, different as they were, counting for nothing.

And, of course, he gets it in the neck. The ancient equivalent of the tabloid press are now on their high horses. You can imagine the headlines: “Consorting with the enemy”, “Snubbing convention”, “Two-fingering his own people”, “Snuggling up to the Romans”. In the forefront of his critics were members of the religious establishment. But Jesus pointedly rebuts their criticism. “I tell you, not even in Israel have I found such faith.” That’s a real smack in the face for those running the religious show. The mere hint that, outside their community, someone might be found who could show them exactly what they should be like themselves.

The centurion, Jesus suggests, offers an object lesson to his fellow Jews. It’s interesting to note St Matthew’s expansion of this detail. He really lays it on. Listen to him:

Truly I tell you, in no-one in Israel have I found such faith. I tell you, many will come from East and West and will eat with Abraham and Isaac and Jacob in the Kingdom of Heaven, while the heirs of the kingdom will be thrown into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

That stricture is as sharp and biting now as it ever was. We must never let our religion dry out into a mere set of rules and regulations. It must never lose its heart. Or its spirit. Our religion was made for men and women and not the other way round.

When our religion seems to have done a series of “reverse miracles”; when, that is, grace is turned to law, wine turned back to water, when the beautiful body of faith becomes skeletal and just a bag of dry bones, when good news morphs into grim news and self-righteousness, priggishness, judgementalism strut their stuff, then beware, the stranger, the foreigner, the centurion, the enemy. They may have more to show us so-called believers the real meaning of faith. It may lay with them to make us aware of our lost inheritance.

Religion so easily petrifies. Its arteries harden. It makes a fist of the open hand that’s designed for generosity. People seem to need a fixed shape and a rigid body of laws. I’ve recently come across a prayer booklet for one brand of Christians. It’s wedded to the idea of prosperity. You pray in the right way and “give your life to Jesus” totally, and then the sun will always shine on you. Women will no longer be barren, businesses will flourish, life will be rosy, relationships will always be buoyant, and there’ll never be a cloud in the sky. It’s bunkum. Religion can never offer these cheap consolations.

And then I read in the newspaper just yesterday how long the queues are as people wait patiently to offer their reverence to a relic of St Thomas of Canterbury. A bone from his elbow (hardly the most prepossessing part of anyone’s body) that’s described as “the shape and size of a broad bean” is attracting the crowds. In the parliament Chapel there are normally just a dozen or so people at the weekly Catholic Mass. This week, in the presence of the broad bean, the place was packed.

I just don't understand it. I'm looking for a suitable broad bean myself in the hope that it will improve attendances here at Wesley's Chapel. It's extraordinary how we can turn religion into a set of observances where reason flees and the spirit is led into curious practices and ideas. We should beware of this.

Let me end with an illustration offered by Andrew Marr (a British political pundit famous for his Sunday morning TV show on current affairs) in his autobiography. He talked about his father's favourite rose – which he'd taken extraordinary steps to care for. He'd built a little fence around it so that gazing animals wouldn't come and eat it or trample on it. But, after a longer-than-usual-holiday, his dad came back home only to find that the rose had perished for lack of care and attention. It had perished; but the sticks that formed the fence around it had taken root and were showing signs of growth. Aah ha! Our religion can be like that. What we build around it flourishes whilst the religion itself fades into desuetude.

The Old Testament lesson (from the book of Kings) showed King Solomon, as he opened his brand new Temple reminding his Jewish listeners that it was built not only for their religious life and devotional practises but also as a shelter for "the foreigner". It was because the people of Judea forgot that lesson that the foreigner finally put paid to the successor Temple in Jerusalem in the year AD70. The centurion reminds us of the importance of faith and of the refusal to allow that faith to petrify and wither. We need to learn a lesson today from him.

Amen