

Prayers

Opening prayer

Lead me to pray, dear Lord, to speak to You in depth about everything that matters to me. For I need to know what You think of what I do, or I fail to grasp the bigger picture and become lost in my own wayward thoughts and feelings. I ask therefore, feed me by the wisdom and truth of Your Word, and feed me in my spirit by day and by night; hear my prayer and draw close to me, Lord God, and may I know your presence within everything I do and give glory to your name for ever. AMEN

Prayer Suggestions

General theme for the week: vision

1. For yourself

Ask the Lord God to give you a vision of your future, something to aim at which is in accord with His will.

2. For your friends and family

Ask the Lord God to bless your future with the people you love. Ask the Lord your God for the patience, kindness, and mercy you will meet to maintain friendship and closeness in the years ahead.

3. For the church and its work

Ask the Lord God to bless the future of your church fellowship. Ask for a vision of what He wants you to do within the life of your church, for the fulfilment of its purposes here on earth.

4. For your neighbourhood, your country and the world (News)

Ask the Lord your God to bless the future of your country, and pray for Christian politicians who seeks to influence the governance of your country for good, and for God

Meditation

If I have wandered down the wrong road,
You are always there one step ahead of me,
Creating another route back to Your pathway.

If I have cried the tears of loss or strife,
You are always ready with a touch of love
To draw my simple soul back again, to life.

If I have slipped upon the stony ground,
You are always there to lift me to my feet
And soothe my bruised ego with a quiet word.

If I have let myself jump too far ahead,
You are always there to take the impact
Redirecting my energies again, so graciously.

If I have been too keen to claim my credits,
You are always there to hold me back enough
To give the glory to the One who made me what I am.

Bible Study

Bible passage – Matthew 8:5-13

⁵ When he came into Capernaum, a centurion came to Him with an appeal, he said,

⁶ 'Lord, my servant is lying at home paralyzed and in a terrible state.'

⁷ Jesus said to him,

'Do you think I will come and heal him?'

⁸ The centurion answered,

'Lord, I am not worthy to have You come under my roof; but only say the word and my servant will be healed. ⁹ For I am under authority too, and have soldiers under me. I say to one, "Go," and he goes, and to another, "Come," and he comes, and to my servant, "Do this," and he does it.'

¹⁰ When Jesus heard him, He was amazed and said to those who followed Him,

'Amen! I tell you I have found no one with such faith in all Israel. ¹¹ I tell you, many will come from east and west and will sit at table with Abraham and Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven, ¹² while the heirs of the kingdom will be escorted outside into darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.'

¹³ and then Jesus said to the centurion,

'go, and let this be done for you according to your faith.'

The servant was healed at that very same hour.

Review

After the healing of the leper, the next healing miracle recorded by Matthew is the healing of the servant of the Roman Centurion. It is a remarkable story in which Jesus was confronted with a Gentile man of considerable standing and authority. Those around Jesus would have watched with interest to see what he would do, because it was regarded as improper and unclean for Jesus, a Jew, to have anything to do with a Gentile. Jesus however, accepted the centurion just as He had previously accepted the leper (8:1-4), but here, 'touch' was not the issue, for the person who needed Jesus' healing touch was not present.

The discussion which followed is one of the most intriguing conversations recorded in this part of the Gospel, because Jesus drew out of the Centurion a fascinating expression of faith. His initial question 'Do you think I will come and heal him?' is not a dismissive answer to the centurion. As we shall see in the main Bible study, in the cultural setting meant that this was a warm response from Jesus which drew out from the Centurion the great expression of faith which is so well known even today (8:8-9).

Jesus was clearly impressed, and what the centurion said inspired Jesus to speak prophetically about the work of God at the end times when Jews and Gentiles would finally join together in fellowship. In general, Jesus talks mostly about his own ministry to the 'lost sheep of the house of Israel' (e.g. 10:6, 15:4), and this is one of those wonderful occasions in the Gospels when Jesus sees beyond His own ministry to the eternal purposes of God. Then, after this amazing exchange of speeches, Jesus responds to the initial request almost casually, saying to the centurion 'Go, and let it be done for you according to your faith' (8:13). It seems as if Jesus had broken all the expected rules of healing, but what had happened, and the faith shown by the centurion was amazing, and an example to all who have followed, both Jew and Gentile alike.

This story is also found in Luke 7:1-10, and there are similarities to John 4:46-54, and as with all the stories of Jesus, it is possible to learn by comparing the different stories as they are recorded in the different Gospels; in this case, in Matthew and Luke. Each Gospel writer has a particular interest, and this allows us to see the same story from quite different perspectives. Matthew is interested in Jesus' authority, but Luke is much more interested in the personal details of the story; and if you read the two, you will see this clearly. It is not really very surprising that these great stories survive in different forms, as it is well known that people remember events quite differently, and it is easy to imagine how the stories about Jesus would have been circulated by people who saw what happened from quite different perspectives. Indeed, these differences enable us to have confidence in the truth of the all the Gospels.

Matthew' purpose in these stories was to demonstrate Jesus' power and authority as Messiah. He previously hinted at this quite strongly in the Sermon on the Mount, and in the story of the cleansing of the leper, he accepted worship from the man before proceeding to heal him. In this way, he cut across the Jewish laws of ritual cleanness, but acted on a higher ethical authority by healing the one who was suffering. Our story today develops this same theme, but includes a fascinating development of the subject of 'faith'.

Going Deeper

The details of this story are fascinating, and at each point in what happens, Matthew indicates something new about Jesus' approach to people and to healing. Also, the centurion's own speech is one that Jesus commended, and is therefore worthy of our special attention.

Healing of the Centurion's servant

It is worthy of note that every centurion mentioned in the Gospels and the stories of Paul in Acts, had good press from the writers of the New Testament. This may be co-incidental, but it may be that the good quality people who were head-hunted for such positions in Roman society proved, in general, to be moral citizens. As such, they were people who were willing to listen to what Jesus had to say and respond with consideration and good mortal judgement. Certainly in Matthew's Gospel, the only other centurion mentioned apart from the one in this story, was the one who watched Jesus die, and prophetically pronounced Him to be 'God's Son' (Matt 27:54). It is also worth remembering that the very first Gentile convert to the Christian Faith was a centurion named Cornelius; a story recorded at length in Acts 10.

In addition, Herod Antipas was known to employ centurions in Palestine because of their qualities. They were not taken on as soldiers, but as general 'heads of police' in the districts, responsible for a variety of civil and governmental activities; they were loyal people, and were renowned for being faithful to the state and the wider Empire. These were influential men who had extensive households which would have included a significant number of relatives, servants and slaves.

This centurion had a 'servant' who was ill, and he was either paralysed or in seizure in the course of his illness (8:5). The Greek word for the servant is the word 'boy' which could mean almost anything. Some people have tried to work out whether we are talking about a 'son' or a 'servant' (by implication, a servant who was 'liked' by the centurion), or a slave (by implication, someone who was treated like dirt). I am sorry to say, but it is quite impossible to know which of these it is because Scripture does not give us enough information to decide which it is. All we can say is that the centurion was concerned enough to go and find Jesus at this early stage of His ministry when he was just beginning to become known, and, for whatever reason, seek His help.

Jesus responds to the Centurion

After Jesus had been confronted by the centurion with his story, Jesus responded with a question, 'Do you think I will come and heal him?' This sounds a little odd, and may well be different from what you have in your Bible, so I will explain. The Greek of this passage can either be translated as a question, as I have done, or as an emphatic 'I will certainly come and heal him'. Nearly all the versions of the Bible have the emphatic form, because it sounds as if Jesus is thereby willing to heal (which we presume He is) whereas the 'question' version sounds as if Jesus is hesitant. However, because this Greek construction is always used elsewhere in the New Testament to give an obvious question, I have taken the bold step of doing so here. Further, just because Jesus asked a question does not mean to say that Jesus was responding negatively to the centurion; indeed, probably the opposite.

Look carefully at the story, and you will notice that the centurion had not asked Jesus to come to his house. He had merely told Jesus the situation. The centurion would have been very inexperienced in the affairs of early Palestine if he was not aware that Jews had strict laws forbidding them (and Jesus) to enter the house of a Gentile, or to touch a Gentile, let alone a sick one! The Mishnah (a collection of written guidelines about the law which are not in Scripture) of Jesus' day said 'the dwelling places of Gentiles are unclean' and Leviticus 5:3 forbade touching anything unclean. When Jesus asked the question 'do you think I will come ...' (v7), he was following the logic of the conversation with centurion. He was asking the centurion what he expected Him to do? Jesus knew that this intelligent man would have something important to say, and He drew it out of him.

The centurion's response, and Jesus' prophetic vision

The speech of the centurion to Jesus was a revelation of faith. It was all about the exercise of authority and power within a chain of command (hence 'under' authority), and Jesus responded with warm affirmation. Even as Messiah He knew that He had to do the will of His Father whilst on His earthly mission, and He recognised in the centurion a quality of faith that he had not yet seen. Yes, He had found faith amongst Jewish people; at least from the disciples who followed Him at this early stage of their journey together. But this clear and impressive understanding of Godly authority was something new. Jesus was amazed, and in one of a significant number of occasions in Matthew's Gospel, He used the emotive word 'Amen' before declaring the uniqueness of this faith shown by the centurion (my translation of verse 10 is quite literal!) The centurion had spoken with clarity about Jesus' authority not just over sickness, but, if you read his words carefully, His authority over people as well. Jesus knew what was happening and picked this up.

The whole conversation drew out of Jesus an astonishing vision of the future. It was well rehearsed by the Jews of Jesus' day that the prophets had predicted a day when God's people, now dispersed amongst the nations as the Jewish 'Diaspora', would be gathered again 'from east and west' to 'the bosom of Abraham' at a great feast (Isaiah 60:12, 2:2-4, Micah 4:1-4, Zechariah 8:20-23, for example). Jesus, in response to the profound insight of faith from the Gentile centurion, prophetically saw a time coming when two startling things would happen. Firstly, Gentiles would join the Diaspora both in the returning, and at the feast with Abraham (8:11); and secondly, those 'heirs of the Kingdom' (Jews) who had not responded to Jesus with faith would be omitted from the banquet, with much anguish! (8:12) 'Weeping' and 'gnashing of teeth' in the darkness was a picture of rejection as much of God by people (Psalm 112:10), as people by God; though we tend to think of it the latter way round only. The real pain is for those who by choice refuse to see God in His earthly Messiah, Jesus.

Such an outburst may well have offended some of Jesus' listeners, but He was doing none other than drawing out the further prophecies, mostly of Isaiah, which indicated that this was exactly what would happen. All this was indeed already there in the Old Testament for those who would read it (Isaiah 25:6, Psalm 107:3, Isaiah 43:5,6, for example). The whole prophecy (8:10-12) foresaw the time when the Church would expand beyond Judaism and amongst the Gentiles, based upon a personal faith in the Messiah, who was Jesus. As the centurion hinted (8:8,9), this faith would be one that expressed a claim upon the life of the individual by Jesus Himself, and would lead to the day when all of God's people, Jew and gentile alike, would rejoice together in the presence of God, at His feats, with rejoicing!

The healing of the servant

Those who were really following the plot of Jesus' life would have realised that His response to the centurion was no surprise. Jesus had much more work to do amongst His own people; a work that would appear fruitless, but would lead to the Cross, and then His resurrection and the coming of the Spirit upon His Jewish disciples, the men who would put into effect the ministry to the Gentiles at His command (Matt 28:20).

At the very end of our story, lest we forget, Jesus healed the servant (8:13), with words of commendation ringing in the ears of the centurion. He did this at a distance, 'with a word' (8:8 and 8:13). This was quite different from the healing of the leper in which Jesus touched the man who knelt before Him. Some have been pre-occupied by the question of how and why Jesus did this healing by proxy, and it is a fascinating question to explore, however we should be careful not to read too much into the story, because it was not an issue for Matthew, for whom a miracle was simply evidence of the Kingdom which would eventually point to the great miracle of His own resurrection and the establishment of the Kingdom of God. We are bothered about ways and means today, but the Bible does not give us 'text-book' information on what we want to know. Our passage is content to describe a miracle, Jesus' authority, and faith. That was what Matthew wanted to tell us about.

Before we finish, it is worth observing that when Jesus first knew of the situation, He said 'Do you think I will come and heal him?' (8:7), a question which ends with the Greek word for 'healing', which is 'therapeuo'. This is a general word for healing which could easily be rendered 'treat him', or 'see to him' in the sense of dealing with the needs of the servant. The centurion, however, believed that if Jesus acted with a word of authority, then the servant would be 'healed', and here he used a different Greek word 'iathesetai' which means 'cured'. He dared to ask Jesus for more than what was offered! When Jesus finally responded to the request for healing, at the end of the story, he used the same word the centurion used; 'cured'. This was His amazing concession to the faith of the centurion.

Discipleship

Application

One thing we can most definitely learn from this amazing story is that we should not make unnecessary rules about the work of the Kingdom or about healing ministry. Jesus' focus in this passage was clearly on the Kingdom of God, again, and although the servant was not the 'star character' of the story, his healing served to highlight the nature of faith in his centurion master in a quite remarkable way.

We should aspire to the faith of this Gentile man. His faith was not based upon his ability to say anything and get it done, but on the understanding that there was a master for whom that was true for all things physical and spiritual. The centurion saw this in Jesus, and we are invited to see this as well. Such faith totally respects the authority of God, and just as the centurion recognised that his own authority was insufficient to deal with the situation which faced him with his servant, so we need to learn when our own natural or gifted authority is insufficient. For all our work in the Kingdom depends upon our Lord. His authority and His alone.

Questions for groups

1. Can you give examples of faith or of healing that have been inspired by this story, or remind you of it?
2. What do you understand to be the 'faith' of a Gentile. Is it different from the 'faith' of a Jew?
3. Do you picture yourself at a feast one day with your heavenly Father? IT is one of the most common pictures of heaven in the Bible!

Discipleship challenges

- *Consider the healing ministry within your church. Does it meet people's physical and spiritual needs? How can you come to terms with the healing ministry of Jesus and His Church so that God can use you to help others?*
- *Discuss with those in your home, perhaps a husband or wife or close family member, what it means to pray for one another particularly for healing, and especially when you are not with each other. Work at finding ways to pray for each other for healing in the everyday circumstances of your lives.*

Final Prayer

We worship You, Lord Jesus Christ. For You have shown the way of life, a path through the intricacies of the world and its pitfalls; a path of life, not death; a path of love, not hate; a path of wholeness, not despair. Keep us in Your way, faithful God, so that we may never be lost. AMEN
