

A soldier's faith

Christ Church: 10th November 2024 10.00 am. & online
Matthew 8:5-13 (page 972)

A Gospel healing for Remembrance Sunday

The same story comes in Luke 7:1-10.

A centurion was a Roman army officer in charge of 100 men, and under a tribune, prefect and, ultimately, the legion's legate. He would be a tough soldier although Luke makes it clear this one had been particularly kind to the local Jewish population. To say that discipline in the Roman army was strict would be an understatement. Where else do we meet a centurion in the Gospels and what did he say (Matthew 27:54)?

Matthew's Gospel has blocks of Jesus' teaching interspersed with events. This passage comes within one of these events sections, immediately following the Sermon on the Mount.

But what is its theme? We can see these verses through four different lenses: healing, authority, faith and Kingdom.

Lens 1: Healing – *the picture of a poppy*

This is what you might expect to find as a theme. But note too Jesus' healings and related miracles have a completeness about them. See 'immediately' in 8:3 for the man with leprosy, Peter's mother-in-law in 8:15 was at once 'able to wait on him', the sea became 'completely calm' in 8:26 and, in our verses, 'at that moment' in 8:13. These outcomes are not what you would expect for someone with a fever, or paralysed, or in a storm, etc.

Lens 2: Authority – *the picture of an army side cap*

But Jesus not only was able to heal completely, he also taught with authority (7:29), subdued nature with authority (8:27), forgave sins with authority (9:6,8) and ordered demons to leave, with authority (8:32). The centurion recognised that authority from his military experience (8:9), more so than the disciples at this stage. Jesus is not just a miracle worker; he had an innate authority over creation and its darker side.

Lens 3: Faith – *the picture of the Royal Artillery brooch*

Some people had faith (8:2), the disciples had only 'little faith' (8:26), Jesus loved to see people with faith (9:2) and, here, Jesus is amazed at the 'great faith' of the centurion (8:10). Note that often it is the crowd amazed at Jesus (7:28) but here Jesus is the one who is amazed. Jesus pays particular attention to the faith of people in these examples and this Roman soldier is a stunning example of logic: if Jesus can 'heal' with 'authority', why does he need to be physically present? So in 8:13 'let it be done just as you believed it would'. And this man was a tough, pagan soldier!

Lens 4: Kingdom – *the picture of military medals*

But this passage also has a Kingdom theme. Jesus heals a nobody in 8:1-4 and then a nobody of a somebody in our passage (cf last week on the woman and Jairus). But here he is healing a servant of a Roman soldier – someone who was in no way a Jew. And here is Matthew continuing a theme where the Wise Men come from foreign lands to the child Jesus (2:1-12) with a Roman soldier being praised over and above the Jews – with an OT reference from Isaiah 25:6-9. Here is Matthew as a Jew pointing to a new Kingdom reality.

So what?

How might this story impact our discipleship? Christians are to be soldiers ready for battle (Philippians 2:25, 2 Timothy 2:3-4 and Ephesians 6:10-20).

Our Commander in Chief has authority over all creation and our response has to be one of faith in him and obedience to that authority. He has brought us healing through the cross. The old hymn sums this all up as 'Trust and obey'.

If you are rethinking this in a Connect Group meeting this week:

- (1) What do you see through each of the four lenses in turn when you look to Jesus as healer, as the one with authority, as the one who calls for our faith, and as the King of God's Kingdom?
- (2) What do my four pictures of poppy, cap, brooch and medals say to you as a disciple of Jesus Christ?
- (3) In what ways should we see ourselves in soldierly service?