

Message for July 3, 2022

Luke 7:1-10

The Roman Empire was one of the greatest empires that the world has ever seen but it was also a very grim place for most of its people. While some people were fabulously wealthy, most of the people were slaves and mistreated as such. Even the majority of those who were free lived lives of grinding poverty, and this made for a very unhappy populace. This was especially true in the city of Rome and in an effort to keep things under control, the government came up with a programme that we call “bread and circuses”. What this meant was that everyone in the city was provided with free food and entertainment. Part of the entertainment were the gladiatorial fights in the Coliseum. It was thought that by going to the Coliseum and watching men fight each other or wild animals, the people would forget about how unhappy and wretched their lives were. This worked too and so for centuries the emperors staged their bloody spectacles in the arena.

Not surprisingly the deaths of thousands of men, women and even children, not to mention the animals, all in the name of sport, disgusted most of the Christians. No one however dared say or do anything about it until a young man named Telemachus did.

Telemachus was absolutely sickened by the so-called games and his revulsion grew until one day he couldn't stand it any longer. With a loud cry he vaulted over the barriers onto the arena floor. He rushed over between two duelling gladiators and with a loud voice shouted, “In God's name, stop it!” But they didn't stop and within seconds Telemachus himself lay dead. While Telemachus never knew it though, he was one of the very last people to die in the arena. It was a pivotal moment, an ‘ah ha’ moment as if it were, because everyone was so sickened by his death and so admired his faith and courage, that the so-called games came to an end. A blood-thirsty era came to a close because of one man's faith and courage. But while Telemachus probably never realized it, by doing what he did he was following in the footsteps of a whole host of others who went before him including the centurion in today's scripture passage.

The centurions were the backbone of the Roman army and the equivalent of today's sergeants. They were hard men and people to be reckoned with. As it happened, a slave that belonged to this one particular centurion was deathly ill. Now most centurions probably wouldn't have worried too much about the health of a mere slave but this one did and, like everyone else in Galilee, he had heard about Jesus and his miracles. He decided then to ask Jesus to do something to help, but it also appears that this centurion was a diplomatic man. As a Roman officer he could have simply ordered some of his soldiers to go and get Jesus, but he didn't. Instead, he asked a delegation of Jesus' fellow countrymen to intervene on his behalf which they gladly did. The delegation told Jesus about how wonderful this centurion was and that he most certainly deserved Jesus' help. Unlike the vast majority in the occupation forces, this official both liked and respected the people whom he governed; in fact he had even built them a new synagogue! Jesus agreed to help.

As they approached the centurion's house, they were met by a second delegation and they too had a message for Jesus. In it the centurion said that he was not worthy to have Jesus come into his house, all Jesus had to do was say the word and the slave would be healed. When Jesus heard this he marvelled: why here was a Gentile, a non-Jew, a person who wasn't expected to know anything about God and he had more faith than anyone else that he had ever met! Perhaps not surprisingly then, when the delegation returned to the centurion's house, they were told that the slave had been cured.

This is the miracle of the healing of the centurion's slave and while we may not realize it, that healing was a most significant event in Jesus' ministry. It was because it marked the very first time that a person who wasn't Jewish demonstrated faith in Jesus. That centurion is the spiritual forerunner of not only Telemachus but also the millions and even billions of people in the world who would eventually come to believe in Jesus even though they weren't Jewish. He anticipated the faith of the vast majority of Christians including us, and that of course is what today's lesson is all about; faith.

A Christian Reformed minister named Arthur DeKruyter has written a book entitled, "Journey to Joy: The Disciplines of your Spiritual Life". One of this book's aims is to encourage people to deepen their spiritual lives and their relationship with God. DeKruyter says that in order for this to happen we have to understand what faith is and what it involves. He says that faith has four

separate and yet inter-related components: belief, trust, courage and last but not least, action. He also says that without all four of these we cannot have a living, vital faith.

The first of these components is belief and when we think about it, that's rather obvious, isn't it? How can we possibly have faith in God if we do not believe in him? Indeed when it comes to God and his reality, all we can do is have faith. We certainly cannot prove anything; why we can't even prove that God himself exists! We can't see God or touch him. To be sure, we can say that the world around us testifies to his existence and presence along with his love and creativity, but does it really? To me it most certainly does, but an atheist can and does argue that the world is nothing more than the result of the laws of nature and that God has nothing to do with it. When it comes to God's existence and even his very nature, we can't prove anything. All we can do is believe in him, but of course belief is not enough. If we want to have a living, vital faith then we also have to put our trust in God and not just when things are going well. Faith means putting our trust in him even at those times when there seems to be no good reason for doing so and a lot of good reasons why we shouldn't. This brings us to the third aspect or component of faith and that is courage.

While we may not often give it much thought, it really does take a lot of courage to believe in and trust in God. At those times when it seems as if everything is going wrong and that our world is slowly but surely crumbling around us, it may seem foolish and perhaps even down-right stupid to trust in God, never mind believe in him. And yet this is what we are called to do and in fact what we often do. No matter how bad the storms of life may be, we still trust in God and believe in his presence, goodness, and mercy. And when we do this we are, whether we realize it or not, demonstrating the greatest of courage. And this leads us to the last aspect of faith: action.

If we truly believe in God, trust him, and have the courage of our convictions, then our lives will show it. As the old saying goes, "actions speak louder than words", and the way we act is often the best indication of what we truly believe. We may say that we believe in God and that we trust him, and we may even think that we do, but whether we do or not is revealed by the way we behave. St. James touches on this last component of faith in his New Testament letter when he wrote "Faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead".

Truly a living, vital faith consists of four separate and yet inter-related components, and the principal character in today's lesson demonstrated all four. The centurion believed in Jesus and trusted in him. If he didn't then he would never have asked Jesus for help. The centurion also demonstrated courage by sending for Jesus. What must his fellow Romans have thought of him, a respected officer of the occupying forces, asking this traveling rabbi for help. How degrading! Truly that centurion showed faith and courage by asking Jesus for help in the first place and then, far more impressively, by sending a second message stating that Jesus didn't even have to come to his house in person. All that Jesus had to do was say the word and the slave would be healed. Truly today's lesson is one of the greatest stories of faith in the entire Bible because it, like few others, captures what a vital, living faith involves. Belief, trust, courage and last but not least, action.

Pastoral Prayer

Gracious God, hear us as we come to you in prayer on this summer morning, the last day of a long holiday weekend.

We thank you for what it is that we have been celebrating this weekend, the birth of our nation. We thank you that despite its failures and shortcomings, we live in a country filled with dreams and aspirations of all the good that can be. So often we focus on what we perceive to be wrong and yet, we truly are so blessed; all we have to do is look at the world around us and think of all the people who so desperately want to move here.

We pray this day for the migrants everywhere who are on the move in search of better lives for themselves and their families. We especially remember this day the victims and their families of the tragedy that happened in San Antonio this past week.

We pray not just for the migrants but the refugees as well; all those who have fled war and violence in their native lands. We especially remember the millions who have fled the current war in Ukraine, and we pray for their well-being and safety.

We pray this day for the sake of healing in the lives of everyone who is ill, and we pray too for the sake of the peace and comfort that only you can give in the lives of all who grieve or are troubled.

On this summer morning we give you thanks for the goodness and beauty of this day, and that we are here as a part of your wonderful creation. Help us to care for the world around us and help us to use its resources wisely and well. Grant that not only your creation but also the life of the world around us may be all the better, richer, and fuller for our being a part of it.

We ask these things in your Son's name. Amen