

THE EMMAUS SERIES

9th Sunday Year C

1 Kings 8:41-43

Galatians 1:1-2, 6-10

Luke 7:1-10

Not even in Israel have I found faith like this

Problems caused by the antagonism so easily aroused towards those who belong to another religious tradition are not confined to our own age; they are a recurring theme of world's history. In the world of Luke's experience, the Jews hated the gentiles, and the gentiles despised the Jews. These antagonisms must have been painful realities for Luke, as he lived through two momentous conversions. Before finding faith in Christ, he would have belonged to the gentile fringe of synagogue attenders ('the God-fearing', cf. Acts 9:2). Later he would have known the antagonism directed towards the new Christian movement. Personal experience, therefore, would have given the story of the centurion (whose words have been immortalised in the Church's Eucharistic liturgy) a special interest for Luke. He would have reflected deeply upon the 'faith' praised by Jesus.

'Not even in Israel'. For many people 'having the faith' is a matter of ritual practice and orthodox creed. The people of Jesus' own hometown of Nazareth would have been shocked to be told – as they rejected the world's Saviour with such violence – that they were betraying the faith of Israel. The centurion, on the other hand, as Luke portrays him, shows a sensitive awareness of the ritual customs of orthodox Jewish practice. Because it was unlawful for Jews to have dealings with gentiles or visit their homes (Acts 10:28) he makes his appeal to Jesus on behalf of his slave through his Jewish friends; and, when the slave has died, he sends a humble message suggesting that Jesus not break the rules of ritual purity by coming into his house. But it is not this 'faith' that 'astonishes' Jesus - and which Luke is obviously holding up to us as an example.

As he worked miracles, Jesus often referred to the need for 'faith' in those seeking his help. This 'faith' is not orthodox belief and practice, but an openness to the fact that God's greatness and mercy are coming into their lives through what Jesus is about to do for them. 'This text is being fulfilled today', Jesus had told the people of Nazareth - after reminding them that his ministry showed forth the messianic signs foretold by the prophet. These people of the synagogue, however, did not find the 'faith' to welcome their messiah. The gentile centurion does find this 'faith'; and he is dramatically rewarded.

Associated with the antagonism that frequently arises between different religious traditions is a sectarian refusal to accept the fact that God's blessings might be given to those outside one's own tradition. The Scriptures make it clear that, as Israel learned the ways of God, a counter to this exclusivism found expression in a remarkable tradition of sensitivity to the stranger or 'foreigner' – the prophets even looked forward to crowds of pagans, including Israel's traditional enemies, journeying to Jerusalem to worship the true God. The first reading is moving expression of this tradition, portraying Solomon – as he dedicates the temple that was to become the proud symbol of Israel's faith - as praying for the foreigner who might come to the temple from a distant land. A reminder of the Law of Love that is relevant to our own day.

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