

### ***What Makes One Worthy***

In the name of Jesus, dear friends in Christ: It doesn't always happen, but today is one of those Sundays when there's a beautiful – almost seamless – connection between the Old Testament and the Gospel lessons. Let's look at it. First we have what are several portions of King Solomon's prayer of dedication for the Temple he'd built for the Lord in Jerusalem. It was indeed a magnificent structure. Solomon spared no expense on it, utilizing the finest and most costly materials and employing the skills of the best artists and master craftsmen. When it was finished it was truly a sight to behold.

And yet ... when he considered what the Temple was to be, the dwelling place of the Lord God Almighty on earth, Solomon balked. How could the hands of mere men build anything worthy to be a house for the Lord? So it is that in the prayer he asks with no small sense of wonder, "But will God indeed dwell on earth? The highest heavens cannot contain you; how much less this house that I have built." And understand that his concern is not simply about the Temple's size. Of course it cannot contain a God who is everywhere present. But the Lord had chosen Jerusalem to be the place where he would locate a special manifestation of his gracious presence. He wanted it known that he was different than the false gods of the nations. In their pagan mythologies, the gods are distant beings who are relatively unconcerned about the affairs of men, except for what they can get out of them. In the pagan mind, men were created to serve the gods, who were basically bigger, more powerful versions of humans, with all the same faults, lusts, and foibles that humans have.

The true God isn't like that – not at all. He's not distant; he's here. He's not unconcerned with humans; he's devoted to them. He didn't create mankind to be his servants; he created the human race to be the recipients of his gifts. And that's what the Temple was to be: an actual place on the ground where people could come and receive from the Lord – who was present in a unique way in the building – the gifts of his Word, his grace, and his forgiveness through sacrifices of atonement. When Solomon pondered the wondrous truth of what this Temple was to be – a house for the Lord – then it looked to him to be pretty sad and shabby; hardly worthy of the honor the Lord would bestow upon it.

And if the building was unworthy of the Lord, how much less worthy were his people Israel whom he had chosen out of all the other nations to honor with his gracious presence? The long history of their interaction with Lord was not good. He had done everything for them. He singled them out, gave them his covenant and promises, rescued them from countless foes, gave them the Promised Land; and they consistently returned his kindness with ingratitude, rebellion, and unfaithfulness. They were forever giving the worship due the Lord alone to the false gods of their pagan neighbors. As Solomon prays, he is very much aware of this sad history of God's people. He has the sense that we do not deserve this honor of having the Lord present in our midst, to have him right here to hear our prayers. We don't deserve this anymore than the people of other nations. So it is that he prays also for them:

"Likewise, when a foreigner, who is not of your people Israel, comes from a far country for your name's sake (for they shall hear of your great name and your mighty hand, and your outstretched arm), when he comes and prays toward this house, hear in heaven your dwelling place and do according to all which the foreigner calls to you." This isn't Solomon just being generous: sharing the wealth of the Lord with others, so to speak; no, this is Solomon being

humble, recognizing that God's own people Israel were no more worthy of the honor of having the Lord dwell in their midst than were any other race or nation on earth – a truth that all too often the people of Israel forgot. But the Lord didn't. And in today's Gospel lesson, we see an example of the Lord answering the prayer of Solomon by hearing and answering the prayer of a foreigner.

The incident takes place immediately after Luke gives his account of Jesus' Sermon on the Plain. Its content is remarkably similar to Matthew's telling of the Sermon on the Mount, which shouldn't surprise us. Much of teaching is repetitive. The people in the audience change, but the message of the teacher stays the same. Luke tells us that in addition to preaching this sermon to a large crowd, Jesus also healed the ailments and injuries of everyone there who had them.

News of this all this healing and teaching by Jesus reaches Capernaum, eventually falling on the ears of a certain centurion. He is an officer in the occupying Roman army, which was thoroughly despised by the Jews. Subject peoples tend to feel that way toward their conquerors. But this centurion is an exception. It sometimes happens that soldiers stationed abroad develop an affection for the people and culture of the land in which they serve. And that's what happened to this man – to an extreme degree. He has effectively gone native, going so far as to become a proselyte to the Jewish faith. To be sure, it was probably his study of the religion of the Jews, what with their only one God and all their strange ways and traditions, that led him to learn to love the Jewish nation.

This centurion is remarkable for a number of reasons. First, it speaks well of him that he even bothered to learn about the religion and ways of the Jews. Most Roman soldiers felt a smug superiority to the people of the lands they occupied. "We're stronger, smarter, and better than you. That's why we conquered you. It's obvious too that our gods are better than yours. Yours was too weak to prevent you from being conquered. We're winners; you're losers. You should be learning and adopting our ways. We'd be fools to learn about yours."

That isn't the way this man thought. He shows a far more mature attitude, one aimed at helping him perform his mission of keeping the peace. In order to rule over these people, we've got to understand the way they think. It's a basic principle of war: know your enemy. However, in this man's case what began as a fact finding mission led to his conversion. No doubt he was struck by the difference between the capricious and often vindictive gods he grew up with and the God he came to know through the study of sacred scripture: a God of love, grace, and mercy; a God who came down from heaven and made his dwelling place on earth. No doubt the Holy Spirit had something to do with it too; but he became a believer.

And that put him in an awkward situation. In political terms, he was on top. He was a citizen of Rome and one with some rank and authority. Ah, but when he attended the synagogue of the Jews, he was regarded to be at the bottom. The Jews allowed Gentiles to worship their God, but they reminded them constantly that they were always going to be second or third class citizens of God's kingdom. "We are the chosen ones. You never will be one of us." This was seen too in the way the temple in Jerusalem was laid out with its successive series of courts. It was the one farthest from the temple that was reserved for Gentiles. It told them that they were always going to be farther from the Lord than the rest of us. So, every time the centurion went to the synagogue, it was like being served up a big slice of humble pie, which he ate, by the way. It was worth it to him to know and worship the One True God.

So worth it, in fact, that when the Jews of Capernaum needed their synagogue rebuilt, this man did it. We're not sure if he only paid for it or if he actually had his soldiers help work on it – perhaps as a public relations gesture to improve feelings of good will between the conquerors and their subjects – but it's clear that the city leaders give him credit for it. And that too is remarkable. For a Roman centurion, who is basically like an army captain, a company grade officer not rolling in the dough, to take on an entire building project – a synagogue for the Jews no less, says a lot.

It says a lot too that he was deeply concerned about a slave he owned who was sick and at the point of death. The text says the centurion highly valued this slave, and we should think of that more on a personal level than on a monetary scale. You wouldn't expect that. Your typical Roman centurion of the day has a slave who dies thinks, "Oh well. Tough luck for him. Now I get myself another slave to replace him. No big deal." Not this man. Not only has he become a proselyte to the Jewish faith, he's internalized the values of the faith. Having received mercy and compassion from the Lord, he has become merciful and compassionate.

And here's what's most remarkable about this centurion: when he hears about Jesus, what he's been doing and teaching, he understands what's going on. He's learned at the synagogue that the Jews are expecting their Messiah to come. He hears about Jesus and says, "That's got to be him." He gets it—when most of *the Jews* don't. It foreshadows what's going to happen later on when the Jews largely reject Jesus as the Christ, and his Gospel is received primarily by Gentiles. But more than recognize that Jesus is the Messiah, this centurion also understands something else that most of the Jews are missing; namely that the Jewish Messiah, Jesus, is God dwelling on the earth. He is precisely the kind of foreigner Solomon prayed about who hears of the Lord's great name and his mighty hand, and his outstretched arm, and is drawn to him from afar.

So it is also that knowing of the Lord's gracious character, the centurion knows that he can make appeal to him on behalf of his dying slave. But he dare not go himself. Instead, like a Gentile standing in his place on the outermost court of the temple, he presents his petition through Jewish intermediaries – some of the elders of the local synagogue. They bring his request to Jesus. And when they do, they pronounce him worthy to receive this blessing. "Yes, he's a lowly Gentile; but as far as Gentiles go, he's a pretty good one. After all, he loves our nation and he built our synagogue for us. So, c'mon, Jesus. He deserves this." The implication is, of course, that other Gentiles don't deserve anything from the Lord; it's only those who prove their worth by their works. It's that legalistic mindset at work in them.

Jesus is more than happy to comply. He gets up to go with the delegation, and a large crowd follows. Soon word reaches the centurion that Jesus is on the way – presumably making rather slow progress due to the press of the crowd. But this is too much for the centurion. He knows his place. He understands that he is not fit to receive Jesus and to stand in the presence of the Lord. So he sends another delegation to stop Jesus from coming any closer. They repeat the centurion's message, "Lord, do not trouble yourself, for I am not worthy to have you come under my roof. Therefore I do not presume to come to you. But say the word, and let my servant be healed."

He explains: I'm a man under authority, with soldiers under me. When I get orders from above, I obey them. No one has to look over my shoulder to make sure the job gets done. When I give orders, they are obeyed. I don't have to watch to know that my commands are carried out. You, Jesus, have ultimate authority. Issue the order. I know it will be done.

This brings us to the last thing that is so remarkable about this centurion: his faith. Jesus didn't marvel very often. When he did, it was about two things: people's faith or their lack of it. It happened that when dealing with the Jews, Jesus was at times astonished that they didn't believe in him. On only two occasions we're told that Jesus was amazed because of a person's faith. This is one of them. The other was a Syro-Phoenician woman who had a demon possessed daughter. She was also a Gentile – one who knew she was unworthy to ask, but who presented her appeal to Jesus nevertheless.

And this is the key: what makes one worthy in the sight of God is knowing first and foremost that we are unworthy to receive from the Lord any good thing. Indeed, what we deserve is nothing but his wrath and punishment. But knowing this, we also know the Lord's gracious character: that he comes to dwell with sinners on earth. He comes to take away our sins: first in a representational way through the sacrifices offered at the temple, and ultimately in a very real way in the person of Jesus who offered himself as the sacrifice for sins on the cross. It is for his sake and his sake alone that the Lord is pleased to hear and to answer our prayers. And through him, one day, he will deliver us all from death and grant us life eternal in his kingdom. He will speak the word and it will be done. Therefore let us pray now and always that the Lord would give us both the centurion's sense of unworthiness and his great faith in the word, promises, and character of our loving, forgiving, and compassionate God. In Jesus' name. Amen.

***Soli Deo Gloria!***