

“Yes, the centurion was Lutheran.” Luke 7:1-10

After he had finished all his sayings in the hearing of the people, he entered Capernaum. Now a centurion had a servant who was sick and at the point of death, who was highly valued by him. When the centurion heard about Jesus, he sent to him elders of the Jews, asking him to come and heal his servant. And when they came to Jesus, they pleaded with him earnestly, saying, “He is worthy to have you do this for him, for he loves our nation, and he is the one who built us our synagogue.” And Jesus went with them. When he was not far from the house, the centurion sent friends, saying to him, “Lord, do not trouble yourself, for I am not worthy to have you come under my roof. Therefore I did not presume to come to you. But say the word, and let my servant be healed. For I too am a man set under authority, with soldiers under me: and 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.” When Jesus heard these things, he marvelled at him, and turning to the crowd that followed him, said, “I tell you, not even in Israel have I found such faith.” And when those who had been sent returned to the house, they found the servant well.

Today for our meditations we have the story about Jesus healing centurion’s servant. In a way, nothing that special. However, there is something that we can call a very special.

Would you like Jesus to say about you: “Wow, I tell you, not even among Australian Christians have I found such faith as theirs.” Wouldn’t it be wonderful to hear these words said about our faith. Of course, it would.

And, in fact, if you believe what Lutheran church teaches you already have this kind of faith. Jesus already says about your faith: “Wow, Christians in Barossa, this is good!”

Nevertheless we need to clarify what made the centurion’s faith so unique that prompted Jesus to say these words. This is what we’ll try to do today. First we’ll briefly look at what happened. Then we’ll see how the elders of the Jews understood what faith is. And finally, we’ll unpack how the centurion’s faith was so unique.

First, what happened? Just to summarize it. As Luke tells us Jesus was entering Capernaum. And there was this centurion. Centurion was a title for Roman army officers, ones who were responsible for 100 soldiers. That was well paid and rather prestige a position.

We read that this particular centurion had even built a synagogue for the Jews. He had made quite an investment the sake of local community, supporting their devotion to God. Perhaps he was a believer himself, even if he wasn’t formal a convert.

[By the way, as a point of interest, it seems that archeologists might have found in Capernaum this very synagogue, built by the centurion.]

So the centurion had done some good things for local Jewish community and now, when his servant was sick at the point of death, he asked the elder of the Jews to plea for Jesus' help, and they did.

Upon their request Jesus was ready to go and to heal the sick servant, but the centurion sent his friends to stop Jesus. He believed it would be enough if Jesus just said a word, his servant would then be healed.

What can we make of it? Our questions was – *how did the elders of the Jews understood what faith was.* How can we know it? From their own words. They came to Jesus and said:

“He is worthy to have you do this for him, for he loves our nation, and he is the one who built us our synagogue.” What do you make of this? What does it tell about their understanding what faith is?

He is worthy... for he loves our nation... and he built as our synagogue. What are they talking about? Can you see it? They are talking about what he has done. He is worthy for he has done this and he has done that.

This is such a big problem. This is how majority of people think. Unfortunately this is how many Christians think as well. How do we know when someone is good a Christian? When they live good lives and do good things. Right?

In this thinking the key is – to be good. To do things which you and others consider as good. Or as we often hear it today, to be a nice person. Whatever sad it is, but today so many who consider themselves Christians would have this kind of understanding.

And consequently, if you do good, if only you are a nice person, that's all you need. You don't need the Church, you don't need all these old rituals. You don't need to read this old and boring book. You don't need this Jesus to tell you what to do. It is enough if you are a nice person.

On top of that one can say that they are actually much better people and do more good than those who 'go to church'. That's it. How many of you know people who think like that? And often they are wonderful people.

If someone falls for this kind of thinking it can have three outcomes. Guilt, indifference, or pride. If you believe that your goodness before God depends on how you live, sure, you will strive to live according God's will.

But if you are honest, you will realize that you fail. You constantly fail. In actions, or in lack of them. In your words, or in your silence, where you should have

spoken. In your thought and desires, which often are far from God's pleasing. That will lead to never ending guilt. You simply can't be good enough. You never will be good enough. You will always fail.

Indifference. If you struggle and fail, and fail, and fail, you may just realize that this is not a worthy cause. No one can do this. No one can be perfect. And why would you torture yourself if instead you can just embrace the pleasures of the world. Do as others do, do what pleases you. Think first about yourself. Thus you become indifferent to what your God expects from you.

Pride. It comes if you think that being a Christian is about being a nice person, and you actually don't understand what the holy God demands from you. Then you may focus on external actions, which you and others consider good and if only you are able to live that way, more or less, then you are proud about your goodness.

You don't care about these Christian gatherings, for you are good already, you don't need anyone to preach you how to live, how to be a nice person, for you already are one of them. Proudly nice person.

This seems to be how the elders of the Jews in this story understood what true faith is. You are worthy, you are a good Christian if you are a nice person, and do good things. But Jesus didn't say to them: "Wow, guys, you have nailed it. That's it."

He said it about someone else. About the centurion. This was our second question. *What was so unique about the centurion's faith?* Can you guess from this text? How did he differ from the elders?

"Lord, do not trouble yourself, for I am not worthy to have you come under my roof. Therefore I did not presume to come to you. But say the word, and let my servant be healed." Did you hear this?

Lord, I am not worthy to have you come to me. I am not worthy! One way to understand what it means to be a Christian is - in relation to our actions, our works. The other way is - to understand it in relation to the holy God.

When we look at our works some may be in despair, for there is nothing good that they have done, and some may boast, and look down to other, for they have been really nice people.

But when we see ourselves in relation to the holy God, who searches the heart, who knows everything, all our secret desires, and who is the judge of our thought, there is something that all [!] people have in common. We are not worthy...

This is the first thing to learn from the centurion's faith. We are not worthy to have Jesus to come to us. We are not worthy to be invited into His presence. We are not worthy to be invited in His feast. We are not worthy to hope for His forgiveness.

The fact that He comes to us really have nothing to do with our worthiness, with our goodness, but only with His.

I have heard, and you probably have too, that other Christians criticize Lutherans that we only focus on how bad, how sinful and miserable we are, and that there really is no joy in our church. Have you heard things like this?

What is the first part on our service? Confession and absolution. Why? So that we could be reminded about the reality, about who we are. Yes, wonderfully created in God's image and likeness, with ultimate value and dignity, but also - fallen, broken, rebellious, foolish, indifferent, and so on. Unworthy...

We don't confess this to feel miserable. At least we are not supposed to. We say it to acknowledge the reality and therefore to be able to fully grasp God's grace and rejoice in His mercy.

This is the second thing we can learn from the centurion. He knew he wasn't worthy, and he didn't trust in his own worthiness, he didn't even try to boast in it, instead, he trusted that Jesus is gracious and loving, and that Jesus will listen to his plea, not because of his goodness, but because of Jesus' goodness.

And he was right. And these are so good news for us as well. This is the Gospel. The Triune God loves you and forgives you, welcomes you and blesses you, and gives you the Holy Spirit – not because of your worthiness, but because of what Jesus has done for you.

This is what makes our hearts rejoice. You know that you are not worthy, the Commandments clearly show it, and you know that your only hope on the Last Day is in Jesus, and you know what kind of Saviour He is.

He loves you so much that He gave up His life so that you can be saved on the Last Day. He already received what you deserve. He has made you a child of the heavenly Father, a member of God's family, not because you are worthy, but because this is what kind of God He is.

Once we realize it, it gives us freedom. Freedom to rejoice. Freedom to be at peace. Whatever you have done or have failed to do, whoever you are and whatever your past is like, the grace of God covers all your sins and grants you forgiveness. This is the source of our joy.

There is one more thing that we need to learn from the centurion's faith. He knew who Jesus was. He believed that Jesus was who He claimed to be. The Son of God, the One to whom all authority is given in heaven and of earth.

He trusted that if only Jesus said a word, his servant would be healed. He knew that this is how things work. The One who has authority commands and things

happen. He believed that Jesus was the One, who could command sickness and death to go away. And He was right. Jesus spoke and his servant was healed.

Do you believe that if only Jesus says a word it comes true? Do you? If so then rejoice. For this is what He says to you: “I forgive you all your sins!”

Have you failed as father or mother, have you been too busy, too absent, not interested? I forgive you! Have you neglected your parents? I forgive you! Have you neglected your Lord and have you cared more about yourself? I forgive you!

Have you hurt someone? Have you killed your unborn child? I forgive you! Have you lied, deceived, been greedy, have you been unfaithful? I forgive you! Have you denied and been ashamed of your Saviour, instead of sharing His Gospel? I forgive you! Whatever you have done wrong or have failed to do right, - I forgive you!

Jesus is the Lord. He has all authority. What He says happens. No one can change it. And this is what He says to you. ‘I forgive you all your sins! Come and receive your share in my kingdom! Come and I will give you eternal life! You will be with me forever.’

This is what we can learn from this centurion, and this is actually what Lutheran church teaches and proclaims. Our unworthiness, God underserved and unconditional grace, and our unshakable assurance that our Father in heaven will keep all His promises.

You will see your Lord face to face. You will feast in His Kingdom. As Luther wrote in the Small Catechism, you will be able to live with your Lord Jesus and rejoice in everlasting righteousness, innocence and blessedness. This is most certainly true.

And the peace of God which surpasses our understanding, keep your thoughts and your heart in Jesus Christ. Amen.