

September 23, 2007

Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

St. Luke's account of the believing centurion (7:1-10) illustrates rather well the definition of faith that we find in the Epistle to the Hebrews: "Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen" (11:1). In Luke's version of this story, almost everything about faith remains unseen.

First, the centurion himself sends two messages to Jesus, but he never appears on the scene (Luke 7:3,6; contrast Matthew 8:5). The centurion and Jesus do not meet.

Second, Jesus never directly addresses what is "hoped for" by the centurion. He praises the latter's faith, and He also grants the man's petition, but there is no explicit word of healing for the servant. We are told only that Jesus commended the centurion's faith and that the servant was healed (Luke 7:9-10; contrast Matthew 8:13). Nothing else is said, so that the "substance" remains unseen.

Third, the centurion's faith, concerning which Jesus said, "I have not found such great faith, not even in Israel" (Luke 7:9), is founded on his perception of an unseen quality about Jesus Himself, namely, His spiritual authority. Indeed, this unseen foundation of the centurion's faith--the authority of Jesus--is the most obvious mark of that faith.

To illustrate what I mean here, let us first observe that the story of the believing centurion is the only place in the Gospels, I think, where someone besides Jesus tells a parable. The centurion's parable is direct and very simple: "I also am a man placed under authority, having 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" (7:8).

Although he never encountered Jesus in Luke's account, there is perhaps a sense in which nobody understood the Lord's teaching better than this centurion. In his short parable about authority, it is easy to discern that the centurion faithfully copied the style of Jesus' own parables. Just as our Lord sent his listeners to their own labor and occupations to discern the inner mysteries of divine grace--just as He directed the farmer, for example, to inspect the spiritual aspects of both the sowing (8:4-15) and the harvest (10:2)--just as He encouraged the shepherd (15:4-15) and the fisherman (Matthew 4:19) to consider the religious dimensions of their labor--so this centurion pondered the circumstances of his military profession in order to discern the spiritual quality of a truth.

And what did the centurion learn? He perceived the unseen but effective power of authority. He knew himself "subject to authority," meaning that he recognized his subordination to the government of Rome and, perhaps, to Herod Antipas, from whom he received his commission. He was a man that did what he was told, because he acknowledged the claims of that unseen spiritual reality called "authority." In addition, the centurion himself exercised some measure of that authority; he gave a command, and others obeyed him. His word was effective. Again to borrow the language of Hebrews, this authority, of which the centurion speaks, was "not seen," but there was no doubt about the "evidence" of it.

Because it is a spiritual reality, all authority is essentially invisible. Yet, no one reasonably doubts its real and very consequential existence; there is overwhelming evidence for it everywhere. The centurion knows this from his own life and vocation. Consequently, he is able to recognize the evidence of authority in the work of Jesus. He is manifestly familiar, not only with the Lord's parables, but also with His miracles. He has not seen those wonders firsthand, but he knows about them from others. He has been told, for instance, how Jesus claimed "authority" when He restored the paralytic (Luke 5:24). Word has reached him already that Jesus' "word was with authority" (4:32). Surely our centurion was familiar with the widespread reports: "What a word this is! For with authority and power He commands the unclean spirits, and they come out" (4:36).

The centurion's faith, then, greater than any in Israel, is based on hearing, but he weighs well the evidence witnessed in what he hears. And that evidence testifies to something any rational centurion can detect at a glance: divine authority.

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