

Sermon Notes for Epiphany 3

under authority (gospel)

Here is a manifestation to the Gentiles, or perhaps a manifestation by a Gentile. A centurion is not Jewish; indeed he is committed to religious acts of a Roman character. Therefore his house is unclean; no Jew would enter it. Jews do not share drinking vessels with Samaritans, we hear in John; so much the more all Gentile life is (more or less) polluting. That is the point of Daniel 1; the Jews (Daniel and the Three) will not eat Gentile food, or at the most will only accept vegetables, for these are unlikely to have been involved in idolatry. This is the background (literary and practical) to the gospel passage. The centurion is being tactful; he is making a request in a form which does not involve ritual pollution.

It is not of course a scandal to heal a Gentile, though prejudice readily assumes that it is, and to remind Jews that Elijah and Elisha had worked miracles for Gentiles (Luke 4. 25-27) is to risk lynching. The point is more subtle, and goes nearer to the heart of the gospel. To people of that period, healings which are not “natural” are, if not common, nevertheless comprehensible. It is hardly surprising if somebody who has the gift of healing actually does heal people. The disturbing point is rather that Jesus is willing to heal the “wrong” people (granted for all the text says the servant *might* be Jewish) and to incur pollution in doing so. We do not expect the gift of healing; so we tend to “read” the healing miracles as if they were about healing. Often this is not the case.

Matthew is not very interested in miracles – he habitually abbreviates, cutting out all the details. The story is half as long again in Luke. But even so Matthew has given this story (for him) considerable space. Why? We have already hinted that the Gentile mission is at stake. But there is more. This is less about healing than a dispute about method – and less about method than about authority. It is, we might say, of the natural decency of Jesus that he is willing to go and to enter the house. I have my doubts about that, but clearly if somebody finds this an attractive trait in him, who am I to reject this starting point? It seems from Mark, and to a lesser extent in Matthew, that Jesus challenges the developed system of ritual pollution. Words of challenge would be converted into open rejection. But the method of healing which avoids pollution by not entering the house is offered; in the end that method is the one followed, but for an unexpected reason. It seems that the personal visit has been made unnecessary by the response of the centurion.

The centurion suggests that the personal visit is not necessary; for authority is enough. Of course we know that a centurion is not a high rank; there are many ranks above it before you reach the emperor. It is true that the centurion is under authority, therefore, but there might be a mistranslation, for the argument develops in terms of the authority which the centurion has and so can recognise in Jesus. Maybe the original point is that the centurion is part of a system of authority – he knows what it is, and so how much of it he has. He is used to both receiving and giving orders. And so he recognises the possibility in Jesus. We must be careful here. I have already mentioned Elijah and Elisha. To be under the authority of the Father and to be able to exercise that authority on earth is not a proof of divinity; but it is a proof of his standing with the Father.

“I have not found so great faith, no not in Israel”. Obviously this is not about a creedal formula; it is about trust or confidence. Yet logically something of the creedal type is implied; that the Jewish God (whose ordinances as to pollution ought to be given respect) can heal and that Jesus is at least an appointed means. But we are right to think that the emphasis is on the trust. In Matthew, this is based on a personal encounter. Jesus knows what is in the man. (Oddly, in Luke, the centurion acts entirely at a distance by sending a series of messengers.) The authority which Jesus has is indeed enough. The centurion is right. And if there is authority, then this must extend to the challenges to the “law” as then understood, such as the law of pollution, which Jesus regularly makes.

“Many shall come from the East and the West”. This is the reason Matthew allowed so much space to this story. There is a promise to us Gentiles, even at the expense of the Jews. (Some people say Matthew is the most Jewish of the Gospels; that may be so, but the consequences he draws are negative.) And the basis of the promise is that we respond in trust. This is how God's generosity in Jesus is available to us.

The actual healing is an anticlimax expressed in Matthew's standard formulaic way. For it was never the point of the story.