

Sermon for Twenty-first after Trinity, 2021

Isaiah 43:10-13. Ephesians 6:10-20. Psalm 102:15-22.
Luke 7:1-10.

The Collect: Almighty and everlasting God, mercifully look upon our infirmities, and in all our dangers and necessities stretch forth thy right hand to help and defend us; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, Amen.

Luke 7:1-10 (cf. Mt 8:5-13) ‘And when those who had been sent returned to the house, they found the slave well.’ Didn’t Jesus visit the house?

There is a lot of talk about slavery these days. TV programmes and films document the disturbing stories of people who were sold as commodities. Statues of notables tainted by association with the slave trade are dumped in the sea, or moved into museums, or off public display. New statues are erected as symbols of the proposed, supposed, and alleged superiority of some citizens over the older models. In short, slavery is despicable, and anyone who thinks otherwise must be a terrible person. The problem is, Jesus and St Paul must therefore fall under condemnation too. St Paul writes: ‘Bid slaves be submissive to their masters and to give satisfaction in every respect...’ (Titus 2:9). Jesus fails to tell the centurion whose slave is healed, to be ashamed of himself for subjugating the man. Worse, he condemns the slave to more servitude by healing him. The Torah has specific injunctions on how long an Hebrew can be a slave, and what to do when seven years of slavery elapse (Exodus 21:2-6). There are lots of regulations in the Torah concerning who can be bought and sold, and how they can obtain their freedom. In Rome, approximately 30% of the population were slaves. Free Spartans had up to 70 slaves each. Even the great philosopher Plato fell into slavery for a while. Between 1530 to 1780 over a million white Europeans were enslaved by Muslim traders. But, what defines a slave, and can this be differentiated from indentured labour or bondsmen? Clearly, the subject of slavery is big and tricky. One thing is sure, a slave is under authority, perhaps not always by their own choice.

I think we can agree that enforced servitude of a human being, who is born in the likeness of God, is something that we have no authority to impose. But, a Christian freely accepts that God has rights over them as His disciple. Christ has the authority, but the relationship is voluntary and beneficial. 1 Cor. 7:22 reads: ‘For he who is called in the Lord while a slave is the Lord’s freedman. Likewise he who is called while free is Christ’s slave.’ Romans 6:22 reads: ‘But now that you have been set free from sin and have become slaves to God, the fruit you reap leads to holiness, and the outcome is eternal life.’ Mark 10:44 reads: ‘And whoever of you desires to be first shall be slave of all.’ To be a Christian is to be subject to God and to His commandments.

But, that’s not a very pleasing prospect for modern people who care about individual freedom of choice and an agree reward. Why be an unpaid servant of God, and submit to the Lordship of Christ? The Elizabethan playwright Christopher Marlowe wrote the play ‘Dr Faustus’ with a plot of tragedy and comedy to illustrate how power can be illusory and ambition evil. Faustus turns to the devil in a bid to gain power and knowledge, as all the subjects and skills he had in logic, medicine, law and theology have not satisfied him. Sadly, Faustus is not forgiven in the end as he cannot

reconcile himself to Christ's lordship. Modern-day enslaves the mind to false philosophies such as Marxism and atheism. These entice people to think that the solution to societal problems is within their grasp. In fact, these flawed belief systems lead them deeper into slavery and unhappiness.

Christian submission to the authority of Christ is a model of how the world can be happy. The story of the centurion who sends Jewish elders to Jesus to ask him to come and heal the beloved slave, is an allegory comparing human authority with that of God. The centurion knows he has plenipotentiary power; power of life and death, over those he rules. He says jump, and the soldier jumps. He also knows that he too is under authority, that of six higher ranks, and Caesar. But, wherever he is in the hierarchy, he hasn't the power to order his beloved servant to be healed. The centurion knows the limits of his power. So here in the gospel, worldly power and authority are shown to be contingent on divine power and authority. The centurion is paid a salary, his slave is paid in shelter and food. Neither of them have power to heal others or to heal themselves. They know their need of a greater Master.

Neither Luke nor Matthew say that Jesus actually entered the house of the centurion to heal the servant. Jesus didn't need to lay hands on the slave. In fact, Jesus delegated power to the centurion remotely. He told the Jewish elders, who had come to find him, that the centurion's faith was so rare that he hadn't found such in the House of Israel. Even the secular Household of the Roman Emperor had produced someone whose faith was marvellous: a centurion who is being recognised publicly by one with ultimate authority, Jesus. The elders, having come from a man who had built their synagogue. They would go back and see what such faith could do when rightly placed in Jesus' authority.

The account is more about authority than about the miracle of healing. There are questions for us too. Do we see Jesus as the one who has plenipotentiary power over us? That is a stark question. It is the most important question we can answer for ourselves. It means: do we accept that Jesus has the power of life and death over us? If we don't, we have to believe we have to assume we have the power of life and death over ourselves. But that would be a delusion. That's where the problem of abortion and suicide have their foot in the door. If we don't accept that Jesus has power over us, is it because we have run away from the truth? Jesus has the power of life and death over us, whether we like or acknowledge it or not. No man is an island. None are completely free. We depend on others throughout life. Putting ourselves under Christ's patronage is an act of faith. In faith we trust that He is genuinely interested in our welfare. Like a slave dependent on his master, we trust Him to stretch forth His right hand to help us in all our dangers and necessities. Psalm 123:2 'Behold, as the eyes of slaves (עֲבָדִים) look unto the hand of their master, As the eyes of a maid unto the hand of her mistress; So our eyes look unto Jehovah our God.' Let us be willing and happy to be the slave of Christ.

In the name of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.