**14th October 2012**

**Matthew 8.5-13**

When I was young man, after leaving university I became a community worker for a church in Nottingham. It brought me into contact with a number of wonderful individuals in the community who were doing a lot of good work. One woman, who we will call Doreen, was a real community activist. Doreen was a mother of five. She was well respected by everyone in the community and she was a focal point for much community activity. One day I got into conversation with her about going to church and she said that she didn’t feel good enough to go to church. She said she knew her faults and failings and she saw these people entering church dressed up in their Sunday best and she didn’t feel good enough. ‘People like me don’t fit in there’. she said. I am not worthy.

Doreen got terminal cancer. The whole community was in grief. Her husband didn’t know how to handle it all and banned anyone from coming to see her. I wrote her a card and I took the risk of including on the card a psalm that I had chosen for her. In other words it wasn’t your usual, ‘sorry to hear your news we’re thinking and praying for you’ card.

The Psalm I’d chosen was Psalm 91:

*‘whoever goes to the Lord for safety, whoever remains under the protection of the Almighty can say to him ‘you are my defender and protector you are my God in you I trust’ He will keep you safe from all hidden dangers and from all deadly diseases. He will cover you with his wings; you will be safe in his care.*’

I had read this psalm during my quiet time of prayer and bible study. As sometimes happens when you are asking God for guidance, you get guidance! It jumped out from the page at me. It was hugely risky to put it in a card. But I took the risk. And I popped it through her door.

Doreen rang me and asked me to come round. She said she had tried other faith healers and alternative therapies but to no avail. Could I help her? Well I said I couldn’t but God could. I shared the gospel with her and said that there are no guarantees in life but what ever happens we can be safe with God and live without fear in the knowledge that nothing can separate from the love of God. ‘Can I know that?’ she said. I said ‘I believe you can. Would you like me to pray for you, would you like me to pray for Jesus to make himself real to you in your life and for you to know the reassurance of his love?’. She said ‘yes’. We prayed and she came over all shaky and started to glow and felt a deep peace. She said she felt as though someone had touched her. I came back the following day with some bible notes on the 23rd Psalm. Her husband was all bemused by this. The next day she was admitted into hospital.

At the same time as all this happening, the sister of the wife of the minister of the church I was working for, who from now on we shall call Sue, also got diagnosed with malignant cancer. She belonged to a Pentecostal church in the North West. Being Pentecostal and more extrovert and fervent in their belief they held prayer meetings for Sue, public prayers in worship, anointing, laying on of hands. We would just mention her in our intercessions but wouldn’t get quite so carried away.

Then one weekend it all happened. On the Friday Sue had gone for a scan and the cancerous tumours had disappeared – miraculously! The joyful praise that we offered up to God on Sunday morning was unrestrained. Our minister’s wife was truly overcome with emotion. At the end of the service whilst we we’re still hugging each other, a friend of Doreen’s appeared at the back of the church to say that Doreen had died that morning. Two contrasting experiences of healing in the space of a couple of days.

I have had the privilege and challenge of witnessing other experiences of healing in a variety of forms. Mysterious and awe inspiring, praise inducing and thanksgiving, yet also baffling, confusing, infuriating. Why are some healed and not others. Is there a difference between healing and cure? When is a miracle not a miracle? How do we pray for people to be healed? Did the Pentecostals have more of a hotline to God than the URC did? Do some people have the gift? Do some people have greater faith than others?

The bible passage we have to study today is about a person who Jesus commended for having ‘great faith’.

When thinking about your faith, is it as solid as a cactus that is unwavering, focused, immovable, growing steadily-- oblivious to blazing days and cold nights? Or is it more like the delicate African violet. The smallest disturbance bruises a leaf, the slightest variance in moisture causes our faith to wilt?  
  
How can we strengthen our faith in troubled times when we sometimes have a difficult time under normal conditions? Sometimes we feel a sense of being overwhelmed when things start coming at us from all directions. When pressures increase, we often find that our faith starts to waver. Is it possible to strengthen our faith in troubled times? Is it possible to have strong, unwavering faith?

The story of the Roman centurion who came to Jesus out of concern for one of his servants is a very moving and challenging account.

He was an officer of the occupying forces that were oppressing the Jews. Jesus was a Jew, this Roman centurion was a Gentile. On paper they were enemies. But it didn’t stop Jesus helping him. This is one of the things I like about Jesus the most! He was frequently caught talking to Roman soldiers, small children, fallen women, people of other religions and people of other races. Jesus frequently modelled a kingdom lifestyle that was impervious to prejudice of any kind. Jesus did not see people in the categories we place them. He saw them all as precious children of God.   
  
To Him there is no scar, stain or sin…that conditions or affects in anyway his desire and ability to give those who come to him his complete and undivided attention, his love, acceptance and forgiveness.   
  
This outlander , obviously an Italian…certainly not a Jew, this stranger who comes publicly imploring Jesus to heal his servant, desperately asking for help is given a chance by Jesus.  
  
What does this text tell us about the Centurion”  
He was unqualified by religious law for any kind of help from God.   
He was a compassionate man…He was interceding for his servant.   
He “knew his place”   
He understood Jesus’ restrictions. (His house)  
He understood Jesus’ authority (His occupation)  
  
Look at Jesus’ assessment of this man in verse ten:  
  
“When Jesus heard this, he was astonished and said to those following him, "I tell you the truth, I have not found anyone in Israel with such great faith.”  
  
  
  
Jesus sensed and saw something in the most unsuspecting of petitioners that He called “GREAT FAITH.”  
  
I suppose there are times when we would hope to possess this quality that Jesus called “GREAT FAITH.”  
I mean, after all that would be quite a complement coming from Jesus Christ.  
  
And look at verse thirteen…  
“Then Jesus said to the centurion, "Go! It will be done just as you believed it would." And his servant was healed at that very hour.”  
  
We all certainly like those kinds of results!  
  
WHAT IS “GREAT FAITH” ?  
  
On another occasion in Matthew 17:20 Jesus was responding to the disappointment of His disciples not getting their prayers answered and He explained;   
  
"Because you have so little faith. I tell you the truth, if you have faith as small as a mustard seed, you can say to this mountain, 'Move from here to there' and it will move. Nothing will be impossible for you."  
  
Wow, if we just had more faith, sounds like we could do anything we wanted!  
  
Well, I don’t think it’s quite that simple.  
  
WELL, WHAT…THEN… IS GREAT FAITH?  
  
If Jesus said that Centurion had it, then I suspect the answer to our question is found in what He said to Jesus in verses 8 and 9:  
  
“The centurion replied, "Lord, I do not deserve to have you come under my roof. But just say the word, and my servant will be healed. For I myself am a man under authority, with soldiers under me. I tell this one, 'Go,' and he goes; and that one, 'Come,' and he comes. I say to my servant, 'Do this,' and he does it."  
What do you see here in the heart of this Roman soldier?  
  
Jesus called it “GREAT FAITH.”  
  
He understood Jesus’ restrictions.  
Let’s call this reverence. There was no presumption in this man’s request…no demands. There is an obvious humility here.  
I have always like Ecclesiastes 5:2 when talking about the danger of confusing faith and presumption.  
  
“Do not be quick with your mouth, do not be hasty in your heart to utter anything before God. God is in heaven and you are on earth, so let your words be few.”  
  
The Centurion knew his place.  
He evidenced faith by acknowledging he deserved nothing.  
  
so maybe the prayer of faith is not about reminding God of how much faith we have and what we have a right to as His children.

No one is worthy. What right have you to demand such and such…

But there is more…  
  
The Centurion understood Jesus’ authority.  
  
 In the Roman military system all authority was delegated. When a centurion spoke to his men, he spoke with the emperor’s authority and so his command was obeyed without question. A soldier who defied him would not just be defying a centurion but the emperor himself.  
  
 Although this man was a Gentile and might have had some gaps in the Old Testament heritage concerning Jesus, yet it was the knowledge he had concerning authority in his career that applied to Jesus and which was a big key to strengthening his faith during a time of great need.  
  
In his thinking Jesus was under God’s authority and when He spoke--God is speaking. To defy Jesus was to defy God.  
  
There is a story about Christian Herter who was governor of Massachusetts, he was running hard for a second term in office. One day after a busy morning chasing votes and (no lunch) he arrived at a church barbeque. It was late afternoon and he was famished. As he moved down the serving line, he held out his plate to the woman serving chicken. She put a piece on his plate and turned to the next person in line.  
“Excuse me,” Governor Herter said, “do you mind if I have another piece of chicken.”  
“Sorry,” the woman told him. “I’m supposed to give one piece of chicken to each person.”  
“But I’m starved” the governor said.  
“Sorry,” the woman said again. “Only one to a customer.”  
Governor Herter was an unassuming man, but he decided that this time he would throw his weight around a little.  
“Do you know who I am?” he said. “I am the governor of this state.”  
“Do you know who I am?” the woman said. “I’m the lady in charge of the chicken. Move along mister!”  
  
The centurion knew that Jesus had a whole lot more authority than that. He had authority over sickness and suffering, and the centurion was very concerned about his servant who was at the point of death and so he boldy asked the help of Jesus.   
  
A scripture that sounds on the face of it quite unlike the one I read in Ecclesiastes is Hebrews 4:16;  
  
“Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.”  
  
Here it sound like “GREAT FAITH” is very confident and aggressive.  
  
Here the Bible seems to be saying that we should throw our weight around a little bit when we are praying.  
  
In my opinion, one of the secrets of great faith is submission to authority.  
  
In other words, I believe   
  
…that God knows what He is doing and   
…that He possesses the power to do as He wishes and  
…this is O.K. with me   
…because I trust Him.  
  
Faith is trusting the voice of God when He speaks.  
  
Let me put it like this;  
  
The captain of the ship looked into the dark and saw faint lights in the distance. Immediately he told his signalman to send a message. “Alter your course ten degrees south.”  
  
Promptly a message was received: “Alter your course ten degrees north.”  
The captain was angered; his command had been ignored.   
So he sent a second message; “Alter your course ten degrees south – I am the captain!”  
Soon another message was received; “Alter your course ten degrees north – I am seaman third class Jones.”  
Immediately the captain sent a third message, knowing the intimidation it would evoke from the seaman; “Alter your course ten degrees south – I am a Battleship.  
Then the reply came; “Alter your course ten degrees north – I am a lighthouse!  
  
There are a lot of voices out there in the dark telling us what to do… most of them cannot be trusted.  
“GREAT FAITH” will navigate you through life’s greatest problems if we can just get two things right…  
  
Understand the Lord’s restrictions and Understand the Lord’s authority.  
  
His restrictions you say?   
His nature and His Word.  
  
His authority you say?  
Yes, He can do anything, but you will have to trust Him.  
  
FAITH: The coming together of Trust and Reverence.

There is a reverence in the face of suffering. The last thing you need when someone is hurting is some neat and tidy smart answer. Often the only response that makes sense is silence, silent presence.

I’ve been reading a book called How to be a bad Christian by Dave Tomlinson, who is a vicar in London.

He talks about faith in the face of suffering and the resilience that people show as they deal with pain.

He writes:

*Take Marie for instance, a mother whose eyes el me that she still hasn’t recovered from the loss of her son Tony after seven years. He was troubled soul’ with a chaotic drug taking lifestyle, who hung out with the wrong crowd. I knew him quite well, in a passing sort of way. He had a buoyant sense of humour and would often make playful vicar jibes at me in the street.*

*Then, one day, Tony rang my doorbell and asked if we could talk. This time there was no jokes or jests. Weeping he told me how he would love his life to be different, but how helpless he felt to bring it about. He was intensely sad at the pain he caused his family, especially his mum. We spoke of God’s love and forgiveness; and we prayed together. But the hill was too big for him to climb. A few weeks later, he went missing. His body was discovered after several days in a dark corner of a disused underground car park. He had overdosed.*

*Marie’s mother heart was broken. Not just because of her son’s passing, but because of the thought of him dying alone in such a place. She was comforted when I told her about his visit to me and his longing to change. I also said that I didn’t believe Tony had died alone; that God was with him, nestling him into eternity where he could be the person he yearned to be. I shared with her that wonderful line from The Cloud of Unknowing, where the anonymous fourteenth century writer says, ‘It is not what you are or what you have been that god looks at with his merciful eyes, but what you desire to be.’*

*Tony’s aspirations were also part of who he was; perhaps the truest and deepest part.*

*Seven years of suffering are visible in Marie’s eyes. She will carry it to the grave. Yet somehow she presses on, bearing her grief, holding on to faith, being the mother the rest of her family need her to be. I don’t try to find answers for people like Marie. The words would be unbearably hollow. And she doesn’t need them. The strength of her spirit in the face of such sorrow is the best answer to suffering I know.*

May God grant us Great Faith – a faith of reverence and trust.

“Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding…”