

S.P.A.C.E.

Wednesday 18th November 2020



Jesus heals the Centurion's Servant *Paolo Veronese (c1585)*

Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna - *downloaded from fineartamerica.com*

⁵ When Jesus had entered Capernaum, a centurion came to him, asking for help. ⁶ ‘Lord,’ he said, ‘my servant lies at home paralysed, suffering terribly.’

⁷ Jesus said to him, ‘Shall I come and heal him?’

⁸ 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. ⁹ 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.’

¹⁰ When Jesus heard this, he was amazed and said to those following him, ‘Truly I tell you, I have not found anyone in Israel with such great faith. ¹¹ I say to you that many will come from the east and the west, and will take their places at the feast with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven. ¹² But the subjects of the kingdom will be thrown outside, into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.’

¹³ Then Jesus said to the centurion, ‘Go! Let it be done just as you believed it would.’ And his servant was healed at that moment.

Matthew 8:5-13

(from a lectionary reading for today)

The healing of the centurion's servant

It seems that the story of the healing of the centurion's servant appealed to Veronese because he painted the subject several times. I wonder if this was because it was a theme popular among wealthy Italian patrons who could identify with a man who was used to giving orders and getting what he wanted. If so Veronese subtly and beautifully delivers a clear message to them in this painting. Here the man of military might is seen kneeling before the Galilean rabbi. It is a striking image. The hard-bitten soldier, with two armed men at his side, humbles himself before the godly man pleading for his help. It is a picture of a strong man at the moment when he publicly recognises the limits of his power and submits to one even greater. The relationship between them is reversed: in Jesus' kingdom earthly values are turned upside down.

As an artist Veronese was free to go beyond the biblical text to explore what is going on beneath the surface. Matthew's account makes no mention of the centurion kneeling and in Luke's gospel they do not even meet face to face meeting. In both gospels the centurion recognises the difficulty for a Jew to enter a gentile's house but makes clear that he doesn't think this is necessary. The words he uses are interesting and could imply a meeting of equals. In a sense what the soldier says is "We understand one another, we are both in the same business - we both give orders and expect to be obeyed."

If there is a hint of arrogance in those words Jesus sees beyond it and into the man's heart, recognising a man of deep faith. He expresses that faith in terms that come straight from his own experience of life, rather than using the rehearsed formulae of the religiously respectable. The soldier reveals his absolute sincerity. Jesus marvels at this and contrasts the raw and genuine faith of this gentile with the lack of faith among his fellow Israelites. (In verse 12 he issues a stark warning to those of his fellow Jews who are complacent in their faith.)

In this miracle we see two men reaching out to each other.

- The soldier has a need – a seriously ill servant - so he goes to seek out Jesus, convinced he could help. Jesus responds by offering to go and heal the servant.
- The soldier, aware of the social and religious barriers that prevent Jews and Gentiles entering each other's houses, recognises the generosity of Jesus' offer. He makes a counter-offer which sidesteps the potential problem and reveals his deepest feelings by saying to Jesus, "*just say the word, and my servant will be healed*".
- The centurion has said and done enough: Jesus promises to act and at that moment the healing occurs.

Veronese manages to distil that whole interchange into a single image: Jesus with arms outstretched reaches out to the soldier kneeling before him.

This is a wonderful story rich in meaning but deeply challenging to all men and women of faith. We see practical faith in action, faith that is not deterred by the obstacles of social and religious convention, faith that transcends earthly powers, faith that does not hide itself away or become tied up in convoluted theological argument. And it is a story of faith that brings healing. No wonder Veronese wanted to capture this on canvas.

Prayer pointers

On the theme of healing

For those on our Prayer Chain and those we know personally in need of prayer.

For all who are working to find a vaccination to counteract Covid 19.

For doctors, nurses and paramedical staff facing unique pressures this year.

For healing within nations

For the people of Ethiopia as the country descends into civil war.

For the ongoing problems within Yemen and Syria.

For the United States, that the nation may find a way to move forward in harmony after the bitterness of the election campaign and its aftermath.

For recovery from this year's natural disasters

Especially for the people of Honduras (on our Prayer Diary today) and who now coping with a second hurricane.

For faith

That our faith may be expressed with the boldness, sincerity and humility shown by the Centurion.

And a prayer from this week's Diocesan Briefing:

God, our refuge and strength, bring near the day when wars shall cease and poverty and pain shall end, that earth may know the peace of heaven through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

The next S.P.A.C.E. reflection will be posted on December 2nd