

In Nomine Iesu

The Third Sunday after the Epiphany of our Lord 2022 Those far off are brought near – Matthew 8:1-13

“When He had come down from the mountain, great multitudes followed Him. And behold, a leper came and worshiped Him, saying, “Lord, if You are willing, You can make me clean.” Then Jesus put out His hand and touched him, saying, “I am willing; be cleansed.” Immediately his leprosy was cleansed. And Jesus said to him, “See that you tell no one; but go your way, show yourself to the priest, and offer the gift that Moses commanded, as a testimony to them.”

Now when Jesus had entered Capernaum, a centurion came to Him, pleading with Him, saying, “Lord, my servant is lying at home paralyzed, dreadfully tormented.” And Jesus said to him, “I will come and heal him.” The centurion answered and said, “Lord, I am not worthy that You should come under my roof. But only speak a word, and my servant will be healed. For I also am a man under authority, having soldiers under me. And I say to this one, ‘Go,’ and he goes; and to another, ‘Come,’ and he comes; and to my servant, ‘Do this,’ and he does it.”

When Jesus heard it, He marveled, and said to those who followed, “Assuredly, I say to you, I have not found such great faith, not even in Israel! And I say to you that many will come from east and west, and sit down with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven. But the sons of the kingdom will be cast out into outer darkness. There will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.” Then Jesus said to the centurion, “Go your way; and as you have believed, so let it be done for you.” And his servant was healed that same hour.”

Grace be to you and peace from God the Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Dear friends, fellow redeemed in Christ the Savior:

“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.” (Matthew 5:3)
Those are the first words that the huge crowd gathered on the mountain around Jesus heard from Him. He would go on speaking to them blessings from God.

Many of them believed He was the promised Messiah, the Savior of Israel. They knew it because Moses, the Prophets, and all the Psalms had described the coming Messiah so clearly that there was no possibility of mistaking Him. The signs and the teachings were right. This surely was the Messiah. Others were less sure, but thought that maybe, just maybe, He might be the Messiah. They didn't know and understand the Scriptures quite as well the others, because they were busy people; they did not have the kind of time – or so they thought – that the others had to go to the temple and synagogue regularly and hear the Scriptures read and explained.

There were still others in the crowd on the mountain who were sure that this Jesus of Nazareth was not the Christ. For them the deciding factor was the religious leaders of their religion, the chief priests of the temple, the scribes, and the elders, who already had decided not to be baptized by John. They did not believe that he had been sent to prepare the Messiah's way. They were equally skeptical of this Nazarene carpenter's son. Finally, there were also quite a few present that day who had no interest in Jesus at all: These were people just passing through who'd seen the big crowds and thought there might be some excitement brewing, or they were friends of others who came to be polite, or teenagers whose parents dragged them along, or thieves and pickpockets

who sensed opportunity, and assorted others. In other words, some who were near by Jesus that day, were very far away from Him; and others one might think would be very far away from Him, were much closer than even they themselves realized.

Such were the many individuals in the great crowd that listened to Jesus that day and later followed Him down the mountain after He had finished speaking. Matthew tells us that the first individual to approach Him was a leper, who said to Jesus, "Lord, if you are willing, You can make me clean." The second individual who came to Him, Matthew tells us, was a centurion, a Roman army officer.

Let us consider these two individuals from the multitude that followed Him after the Sermon on the Mount. In some ways these two men were more alike than at first they appeared to be. Both were outcasts from the society around them, one because he had a disease people feared and loathed, the other because he represented Rome, which people feared and loathed. Both came to Jesus because of their need, the first man, the leper, isolated by the loneliness of his disease – something we all understand a bit better after two years of COVID distancing - who probably hadn't felt the touch of a human hand for years, the other isolated by the loneliness of his command in this country far from his native land, whose subordinates probably didn't dare to approach him in any personal way. Both of these men were drawn to Jesus because of what He had said on the mountain: "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." Both believed they would be blessed because of Him. Both believed that the far off "kingdom of heaven" had come near to them in the person of Jesus.

"Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." (Matthew 5:3)

Who are you before God? Are you a leper, an outcast? Are you a centurion, a foreigner? Or are you just a face in the crowd, an ordinary individual like all the rest? Where do you find confidence before God, in your ordinariness? Where is your confidence?

II

Let's approach this question from a little different direction. What is the kingdom of heaven? Most people, most church goers, might answer by identifying the "kingdom of heaven" with the church, or even a church, an individual congregation (although even the term congregation is not one that is used much anymore). So what is the church? How do you visualize it? As you drive here to church you pass gas stations, fast food restaurants, businesses of every sort. Perhaps you passed a fitness club or a hospital. Which of these most resembles what the church is? Is the church more like a fitness club or more like a hospital? A fitness club is where people go to get in shape, whether it be a heavy-duty gymnasium-like facility or a come-when-you-want, do-what-you-want facility. A fitness center is where ordinary people go to work out, to work on themselves, to mix with and get encouragement from other ordinary people doing the same, to get in better shape, to lose weight, to feel better, or even – let's tell a little secret - just to **feel better about** themselves. Is that how you visualize the church, and thus the "kingdom of heaven"?

Or do you visualize the church as a hospital, a place for the sick and dying?

Imagine the leper showing up at one of the local fitness clubs to look into how he could help himself with his problem. Imagine the centurion inquiring whether there was some program there to help his dying servant.

Not many days after the events of our text, Matthew reported another incident that happened to Jesus after He finished speaking the Sermon on the Mount. Some people came to His disciples, ordinary people. They came to ask a question, “Why does your Teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?” (Matthew 9:11) Fortunately for us all, their question was answered directly by Jesus Himself. He said, “Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. But go and learn what this means, *‘I desire mercy and not sacrifice.’* For I did not come to call the righteous, but sinners, to repentance.” (Matthew 9:12-13)

Dear friends, none of us like to visualize ourselves as lepers, outcasts from society, something less than ordinary. None of us want to visualize ourselves being as far distant from God as was the Roman centurion, so that we cannot even conceive of having Him enter our dwelling because we are so very unworthy, and perhaps even somehow to blame for the one dying in our own household.

What gave the leper his confidence? His ordinariness? Hardly, one can only imagine how non-ordinary he felt as the crowd parted fearfully when he approached Jesus to ask for cleansing, and how all must have gasped in shock when Jesus touched him – touched him! - and said, “I am willing; be cleansed.” Where was the confidence of the Roman officer to be found, in his ordinariness? Again, hardly. One again can only imagine how surprised, shocked, the ordinary Jewish residents of Capernaum must have been Jesus with the centurion’s request for help for his dying servant, and even more so when He agreed and turned to go and help. The shock and surprise only grew when they heard the soldier say, ‘No, stop, you need not come in person, for I, a Roman and a sinner far from God, am not worthy that you should come under my roof, but just say the word, just command my servant’s sickness to leave him, as I know you can do, and all will be well.’ The shock and surprise were complete when He turned to all the ordinary people around Him and said, “Assuredly, I say to you, I have not found such great faith, not even in Israel!”

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“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.” So, where is your confidence before God? Dear friends, don’t look for it in yourselves, whether in your very ordinariness or in any supposed goodness or virtue. For we are all of us beggars before God, all of us poor in spirit. We have nothing to offer Him. We are sick and dying, and far, so very far from God. No, let your confidence be in Him who came to us, who closed the great distance between heaven and earth by approaching us, who bore the weight and guilt of our sins in His own body, and then paid for them all. He indeed is the great Physician, the Savior of sinners. He is the King, who came to us in order rule over us in mercy and love, to make us citizens of His kingdom. Believe in Him, and His kingdom is yours. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria