

SERMON on the Healing of the Centurion's Servant, Matthew 8:5-13

Who is the centurion? The centurion was a pagan Roman army officer who commanded a military unit consisting of 100 men. The centurions epitomized everything that the Jews hated. The Jews believed in "holiness" by separation. They separated themselves from all non-Jews, who they considered to be replete with sin, filth and ungodliness. Association with non-Jews in any way, they believed, made them liable to acquire the "sin and corruptness" which they believed all non-Jews to possess. Disassociation was not the only attitude toward the non-Jew. It was supplanted by hatred and disdain. How much more did the Jews despise men such as this Centurion, because he was the captor of the Jews and occupier of the land of Israel and therefore their sworn enemy.

The centurion did not belong to the people of God, the Hebrews, nor did he worship Yahweh, the one true God. Yet this pagan army officer had faith in Jesus and believed that Jesus could heal his servant. Jesus is usually in the presence of those whom he heals and often touches the sick in order to heal them. In this case, the depth of the faith of the centurion causes even Jesus to marvel when the Roman officer states that merely the word of Jesus could heal his servant. "I am not worthy that you should come under the roof of my house," humbly says the centurion. "Just say the word and my servant will be healed". The faith and humility of the centurion was so strong that he believed the power of Jesus to be so great that it was not even necessary for Jesus to visit the sick servant in order to heal him. Imagine the slap in the face to the Jews who witnessed this scene when Jesus states that He has not seen such faith in all of Israel. Imagine the anger and consternation of the Jews when Jesus chastises them for their hypocrisy, faithlessness and pride when He compares them to the centurion. Jesus says that instead of them, the Gentiles, like this centurion, will sit next to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in the Kingdom of Heaven. The faithless Jews, far from receiving the Kingdom of Heaven which they expect and feel entitled to, will instead be cast into outer darkness where they will weep and gnash their teeth. "You can only know the Father through the Son," states our Savior. If the Jews reject the Son and the Gentiles believe in the Son, then it will be the Gentiles who will inherit the Kingdom of Heaven, not the Jews.

Brothers and sisters, what can we learn from this Gospel today? Does formal membership in the Church which confesses the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed and faith in One, Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church guarantee us a place in heaven? It is not enough for us to just physically sit in the saving ark of the Church. Our minds and hearts must also be connected with and part of the Church. It is imperative that we believe in and follow the teachings of our faith as explained, for example, by the Holy Fathers of the 4th Ecumenical Council who we commemorate today. Do our hearts burn with the warmth of faith and love in our Lord Jesus Christ? Do we love and seek to obey the teachings of the Church? Do we love the words of the Gospel and seek to live by them? Do we love others and show our fellow human beings, no matter what their background, kindness and empathy? Do we have humility, refrain from judging others, and consider ourselves to be the worst of sinners? Can we say like the centurion, "Lord, I am not worthy that You should come under the roof of my house"? What was it about Jesus that caused many of the Jews to hate Him so much? It was because Jesus went straight to their consciences, straight to the buried deepest recesses of their souls and hearts, and being proud hypocrites, they rejected repentance and instead sought to kill Jesus. There is an expression, "the truth always hurts." I think that the truth hurts only when we have no humility. If we have humility and are then blessed to see ourselves as we truly are and not as we imagine ourselves to be, we will seek to change, expel the darkness within us and reject the temptation to sin. The man whose heart is cold and callous is spiritually ill and there is something wrong with his faith. We can believe what we want. We can judge others as we choose. We can interpret the Orthodox faith according to our own personal opinions. We can reject the interpretation of our faith as handed down to us by the Holy Fathers. After all, it's a

free country, isn't it? But the truth will always remain the truth, and lies and falsehood and deception will always be just that, lies, deception and falsehood. No matter how hard we try, we cannot change lies into the truth. We can twist the truth. We can put all kinds of imaginative spins on the truth. We can pervert the truth. We can mask a lie and call it the truth. But no matter how hard we try, no matter what brilliant arguments, no matter how passionate we may feel, we cannot change the truth. The Lord teaches us that only "the truth will set you free". Free from what? Only truth can liberate us from anxiety, confusion, despair, hatred, uncleanness, depravity, indifference, depression and all those spiritual ills which prevent us from having authentic peace and joy.

Like the centurion in the Gospel today, may the Lord help us to keep the fire of true faith burning within us. May we one day be deemed worthy to sit at table with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob and inherit the Kingdom of heaven. Amen.