

Jesus Heals a Centurion's Servant Leadership

Based on an address Lichfield Cathedral – 12 April 2025, Seeking the Kingdom on Foot

Matthew 8.5-13

This is of course a story of healing, but it is also a passage which raises challenges about our understanding of leadership – particularly when that leadership is exercised according to a pattern different from that usual among God's people. Jesus himself learns from what he experiences, and commends his learning to others: the challenge is to an expansion in our ways of thinking about leadership and decision-making.

The centurion belongs to a different people from Israel, and he operates within a different leadership structure from Judaism. Roman culture was deeply alien to Jewish people, and here we see Jesus reaching out sympathetically into a very different world.

Jesus praises the centurion's 'faith'. In the context of the healing story, of course this means his recognition of Jesus as Lord; but more widely it also indicates this military man's assurance that what needs to be done will in fact be done. There is a directness and simplicity of trust implicit in his faith which makes for an attractive transparency.

Jesus teaches that there is more than one way to lead, and more than one kind of person invited to the kingdom, not just the 'usual suspects'. This becomes clear in our passage in verses 11-12, where the 'heirs of the kingdom' are passed over for others.

Even the Lord is surprised at the centurion's attitude, and he shares that surprise with 'those who followed him' – which includes us. Discovering gifts of leadership in others, particularly in those very different from us, is often a surprising experience for us. This is a real issue for our churches at every level, and we need to grapple with the implications. The Church of England cannot rest content with being monochrome, or monotone, or the domain one ethnic group, one class or one background. If that is truly to change, we need to expand our leadership patterns, so that we are not simply trying to slot people of different cultural backgrounds into structures based on one set of cultural assumptions. Jesus asks us to go beyond this in order to make space for all.

However, this is not at all about identity politics. The one necessary criterion which must always applies for leaders is the centurion's humble confession: 'Lord, I am not worthy'. What equips us to share in Christ's leadership is precisely the faith which acknowledges our own unworthiness: nobody has a right to lead Christ's church, but many are called from all backgrounds, and none can be ruled out.

According to this gospel, at the heart of the Kingdom there is a table. Leadership finds its place in conviviality and collegiality. It flows out of the Eucharist – not for nothing is a bishop's primary title 'chief minister of Word and Sacrament. Episcopal, or any other Christian, leadership is relational and brotherly, not bureaucratic and remote; and we know enough of the Roman army to know that this would probably have been the centurion's usual way of relating to the men entrusted to his command.

Equally, changes in leadership can be difficult to receive, just as in this passage changes in those sitting to feast are disruptive: expanding the table can be an awkward task. This may indeed cause pain and regret to some, but we should not overstress the words of verse 12: there is no insistence that the expulsion of some need be permanent, and the phrase 'outer darkness' may simply mean 'the space outside the house'. The 'heirs of the kingdom' will still have a place in the reordered dining arrangements, once they have learned that they must not themselves block and exclude – we should remember the so-called 'Parable of the Prodigal Son', in which the last word of welcome is in fact given to the disgruntled elder son: he still has a place in his father's heart.

Finally, this is a message for the universal community which the Church is called to be. The phrase 'East and west' in verse 11 is a shorthand for of the whole world, and for people of every conceivable kind of background. God's expansive people are to be served by an expansive leadership, as Jesus learns from the words and example of the centurion, a pagan Roman of unparalleled faith.

Do we recognise different styles of leadership?

Do we make room at the table for new people?