

St Thomas Church
Epiphany IV
February 2, 2020
rmcneely+

I have not found so great faith
No, not in (all) Israel

We continue the Epiphany theme, the manifestation of our Lord to the world,
Jesus is slowly revealing himself
Who He is
What mission God has sent Him to accomplish on Earth

We continue to walk in Jesus' shoes, to experience His life on Earth

In today's Gospel, we break in to the story just after Jesus has preached the sermon on the Mount, near the beginning of his earthly ministry.

A sermon that may have left some,
Wondering about Him
The sermon was wonderful and it was disturbing at the same time.

As Jesus pulled into Capernaum
That little town on the northern shores of the Sea of Galilee
Close to where the Jordan River enters the Sea
The place that was something of a base for Jesus

He is surrounded by people
By the curious
By supporters
By detractors
And by the helpless begging His miracles
Already known to many

Jesus must demonstrate His connection to God
By making natural things happen
In most unnatural ways

If He was to convince people who He was
He had to show them that He was different
That He was the Son of God.
Here on Earth to save them
Save them from themselves
From their sins
He had to show them the way to God

Put yourself in the sandals of a Jew in Galilee

What would persuade you that this unusual
Itinerant, unemployed, impoverished, uneducated
30 year old
son of a deceased carpenter;
a single man from Nazareth
who is wondering around Galilee
Was the Son of God?

What would persuade you
If that same man
Had walked through those doors
20 minutes ago and sat in our pews?
How would we know Him?
Could He say anything that would convince us
That He was Jesus returned?

In Galilee Jesus healed many people
He cured them of disease for which there was no cure
He restored sight, hearing and speech to those who had lost it forever
He raised them from the dead
He fed thousands with food that was not enough for a dozen

He had to persuade them He was the Son of God.
By His actions
He offered irrefutable proof

In the story for today

We see him heal two people

Two very different people

In two very different ways

The leper was a Jew

The disease was greatly feared

It lead to a lingering death

Victims were cast out of society

Scorned and shunned

Out of the temple

They lived in squalor on the streets

Competing with the dogs for food and water discarded by others

The leper approached Jesus,

Fell to his knees

And said:

“Lord, if thou wilt, thou canst make me clean”

In an expression of absolute faith He asked to be rid of the disease

Jesus did what was unthinkable

He touched the man

contact was thought to be a sure means for contracting the disease

But Jesus touched him

And he was instantly cured

The other man was a Centurion of the Roman Army

A commander of 100 men

In order to rise to the rank of Centurion

A man had to rise through the ranks

He was not a nobleman or highly born

He started in the Roman Legion

As the lowest of soldiers

He was promoted to successively higher rank

Over a long period

For bravery in battle

For loyalty to his commanders

For diligence and following orders

For his ability to lead men

Centurions were paid well by Army standards

They were not wealthy but had all they needed

There are 5 Centurions mentioned in the New Testament

And all of them are portrayed favorably

Just as this man is portrayed in Matthew's account

They are men of honesty

Of courage

Integrity

Of Strength of character

and they were morally tough

They follow the law and their orders

But they are men not afraid to learn and speak the truth

But unlike the Jew, the Centurion is a Gentile

A heathen

And unlike the leper, a man of stature in society

A man in good health

The Centurion and the Leper could not be more different from each other

The leper sought healing for himself
The Centurion of another
A slave, his slave

One would think that a man who killed in battle for a living
Would have little regard for the life of a slave
A possession
Any more than he might for a sheep or a cow that he owned
One dies or exhausts its purpose, you buy another to replace it
Easily done for a Centurion
Under Roman law it was not illegal for the Centurion to take the slave's
life

For the last 3 Sundays we have been reading St Paul's epistle to the Romans
It has been the section of Romans
Where Paul describes how a Christian must live

The life he describes is rigorous
Different from what most of us do every day
Alarming really

This Centurion is acting as if he had read Paul's Epistles in the last 4 weeks.
He is concerned for a slave
In the way that St Paul directs
that we all should care for each other.

He approaches Jesus and begs for the life of his slave some miles distant
Who is grievously tormented

And when Jesus offers to go there
The Centurion says
"speak the word only and my servant shall be healed"

This Roman soldier
 This heathen
 This gentile
 Tells Jesus that if Jesus but speaks the word,
 The miracle is done
 Long distance
 Not even in Jesus' presence
 The miracle is done.

So what starts out looking like a story of Jesus healing two people
 Turns out to be a lesson for us about Faith
 And that is where we need to go next;
 Faith

It took great faith for the Leper to even approach Jesus
 Faith that he would not be severely punished
 For walking up to him
 Faith that Jesus could and would heal him.

It took great faith for the Centurion to call Jesus off the journey to where the
 slave lay tormented.

Both of these very different men showed the absolute faith they had in this
 man Jesus.

So what are we talking about when we talk about faith

The seminary definition is from the book of Hebrews:

“Now Faith is the substance of things hoped for
 The evidence of things not seen”.

Substance and evidence

Both subjective terms

That take long meditation to discern.

Perhaps the Spanish 16th century St ,Teresa of Avila said it best:

Faith and the love of God makes possible
 that which to natural reason
 is not possible.

Christian Faith should never be confused with blind faith
Ours is the product of thought and study
Our faith is the result of our work and lifelong experience.

Blind faith, I believe, you will find withering and temporary
Our faith, call it our St Thomas Faith
Endures

But it is not the product of scientific inquiry or proof
Yet it is an equally valid means of establishing the truth
As any rigor of science

Applied to earthly matters I have faith
that the sun will rise each morning over Mt. Diablo
Where we live.

I know this
not because I have done some experiment
not because I have myself studied astro-physics
and know the principals that govern our Sun and the Earth

I know this from my own experience
My own observation
And perhaps from the opinions of people I respect in the field.

Just as I have faith
That my good wife loves me.
Not from some experiment
Not from some treatise on physiology or psychology
Not from science

But from the years I have spent with her
From my own observations
From my own feelings toward and from her.

I have faith in the substance of the love hoped for
And my faith is the evidence of the love we share that is unseen.

Just as I have Faith in the Resurrection of Jesus, the Christ
I have read the accounts
I read, studied and thought about His book, the Bible
I have spoken with others whom I respect
I have felt the effect of His forgiveness in my soul
And seen it in others

Just as I have faith in God's creation
I have spent a lifetime with all that He made
I have experienced the miracle
I have seen the incredible complexity
The beauty
And I know to a certainty
And I have faith that God created it all.

Faith is as valid a means by which to know a fact
As any other means known to mankind.

Each of us is born with a modicum of faith
For some it grows and flourishes
For others it withers and dies

On occasion our Faith is tested.
We struggle with our faith in God when bad things happen to good people.
Our faith is occasionally diminished in these times.
And our adversary the devil rushes into the cracks to poison our souls.

But we go back to basics
To study
To scripture
To prayer
To the church and its teachings
To our clergy
To each other
To God.

And we restore our faith

And over time

We replenish the substance of things hoped for
With the evidence of things not seen.

Just as any athlete trains a set of muscles with constant work out and training

We must maintain our faith

Work on it

Nurture it

Develop and maintain it.

So the question for us this morning is this

Is our faith

Call it our “St Thomas” faith

The degree of faith that we of St Thomas possess
Equal to that of the leper and the Centurion?

Will Jesus say of us

Verily,

I have not found so great faith

No.

Not in all of San Francisco