

## My Brothers and Sisters in Christ:

The Epiphany season is all about Jesus revealing His divinity through the veil of His human nature. He did that at times by means of miracles. We have two miracles in our Gospel this morning. Jesus cleanses a Leper, and He heals the servant of this centurion from a distance simply by willing it to be so. Our focus this morning is what preceded both healings, a stark and powerful confession of faith. In both confessions, the authority of Jesus to do what was desired was also clearly confessed. So, this morning, we will consider our text under the theme "True Faith and True Authority".

The first healing in our text is the healing of the Leper. Leprosy was, and still is, a frightening disease. Lepers were forced to keep their distance from regular people and to call out a warning of "Unclean!" to anyone who might appear to approach them. When the Jews called it uncleanness, they did not mean untidy, but some form of corruption or decay - and a contagious form at that. Today, Leprosy is still contagious until it is treated. In Biblical times, however, they had no effective treatment. "Leprosy" was the name applied in the Bible to a variety of diseases. It could also infect fabrics and even the walls of buildings. The disease among humans started as a skin condition that caused disfigurement, nerve damage, and deterioration of the infected body

parts even to the point of destroying them. The only effective way to limit their spread was to isolate the victims of the disease, and destroy fabrics and materials – even buildings at times – infected with it.

Leviticus 13 and 14 deal with the treatment of leprosy.

The leper in our Gospel broke the rules of isolation and approached Jesus. He stated simply that if Jesus desired to, He could cleanse the man of his leprosy. That was a bold confession, for in those days everyone would have told you that only God could cleanse a leper. No one else would even touch one for fear of being infected. But Jesus touched the man and, contrary to everyone's expectation, instead of being made unclean by the disease, Jesus made the man clean by His touch. He said, "I am willing; be cleansed." And immediately the man was cleansed of his leprosy.

Jesus then told the man to tell no one. Perhaps his leprosy was not so advanced that everyone could see it, and even though the multitude followed Jesus, Jesus did not want the man to make a public issue of his healing. He told the man to go to the temple, show himself for examination to the priests, as prescribed by Law, and make the sacrifices prescribed in Scripture for one who was cleansed of leprosy. In short, Jesus want the man to give thanks to God and give the glory for his healing to God, and recognize where his blessings had come

from. The man showed his faith, and Jesus demonstrated His authority to command a disease and heal.

The second healing involved the Centurion. This Centurion is a rare man. You can see that in what he does. First, he demonstrates such concern about his servant who is paralyzed and in pain. Secondly, he is a Roman who comes to a Jew for help. Clearly, he must have heard about Jesus somewhere. It is also evident that this Roman believes a great deal about Jesus! He tells Jesus about his slave. Jesus says that He will come and heal the man. The Centurion declines. He doesn't want to trouble Jesus unnecessarily. He also seems to know what ritual offense it would be for a good Jew to enter the home of a Gentile. But mostly, the Centurion understands the authority of Jesus.

He tells Jesus that he knows that Jesus does not need to come to his home to accomplish the healing. The Centurion this knows because he believes that Jesus has authority, and being a man under authority himself, he understands how authority works. He tells Jesus that Jesus needs only to say the word, and the servant will be healed. He compares the authority of Jesus over the paralysis and troubles of his servant to the military authority over him, and the authority which he exercises over the soldiers under his command. He sees the issue not so much as an issue of illness and healing, but of true authority over

things and issues, an authority which he believes Jesus possesses. And He is right!

Jesus marveled at the faith of this Gentile. He proclaims that He hasn't found such faith in Israel - which prompts Him to speak about the future, of the kingdom of God. He tells the Jews that many will come from the East and from the West to recline with Abraham - that is, will go to heaven - but the sons of the Kingdom, the Jews, will be rejected, cast out into the outer darkness, and that there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. Here Jesus is describing the bitter sorrow and deep regret of eternal damnation. Many Jews will be on the outside, but many Gentiles from all over the world will enter in. Such a thing was inconceivable for most people - most Jews - at the time of Jesus. It certainly contradicted their popular theology and because of their popular religion, as opposed to what was carefully taught in the Scriptures, this may well have been beyond their ability to imagine. But what Jesus said was true. We see the reality that Jesus was describing today in the fact that the Christian Church is primarily Gentile, and the Jews are still implacably hostile toward Christ and Christians.

Our Gospel lesson speaks about the power of Jesus to intervene in our troubles and our illnesses. It is what the Centurion refers to as

authority. Our text also shows us how willing Jesus is to heal and bless us. It pictures for us graphically how bold and unexpected His help may be – after all, He even touched a Leper! There is nothing that God will not do, if it is His will to do it at the moment.

And, when God speaks, the creatures of this world obey. The word “creatures”, in this case, means “created things.” Jesus has that authority. We, sinful men and women, often do not listen, and we willfully ignore Him. He could force us to obey by His power, as He does the Leprosy of the Leper and the paralysis and pain of the servant of the Centurion, but He does not. Not yet. Not in this world, When God speaks the troubles of life, illnesses and obstacles listen and obey as if they were living men under the command of their commanding officer. That is true authority. The Centurion understood that, and believed Jesus to be in charge, and to be compassionate. That suggests that he understood who Jesus really was, and sin as the source of his servant’s troubles. He knew that it was in the hands of the Savior to rescue, and that it was in the nature of the Savior to heal and save. That is true faith, a faith that says that when Jesus commands, it cannot fail to be accomplished.

His nature and power are the same today. In all of your troubles, our Lord can help. James tells us that we do not get help, often,

because we do not ask. He goes on to say that even when we ask, we often do not receive because we ask from the wrong motives. We ask just for ourselves, our own comfort or our own pleasure. That is the analysis of God as to why we fail to pray, and why our prayers seem to fail when we do pray. Your sin and unbelief stand in your way. The Centurion came fully confident of the nature of Jesus and the authority of Jesus. When we cry out to God, we also need to do so knowing who Jesus is - and who we are before Him. We need to come with the right motives: submitting ourselves humbly to the will of God and to the plan God has for us. We need to acknowledge His authority and believe in Him, and trust His will for us. And what is His will for us? [Our Salvation.]

When we pray in accord with the will of God, God answers every prayer with a resounding, "Yes!" If we call upon Him from faith, and not with a timid and doubting heart, God gives us what we need, and what will serve to accomplish His good will and bring His plan for us to fruition. We need faith like that of the Centurion, that if Jesus wants to do it, nothing – not distance, not size, not our opinion of how difficult it might be – can stand in His way. He will speak, and it will be done. What a wonderful comfort! What a wonderful hope!

If you want an example, look at the Gospel! You sinned. You continue to sin. You do not trust God and you do not call upon Him as you should. But He loves you, and He died for you. He paid for your sins, and He purchased and won you from all sins, from death and from the power of the devil. Your sins are forgiven! He exercised His true authority over sin and death, and He has called you to true faith! He has called you by name in Baptism and has appointed you to be among those He spoke of in our text - from among the many who come from east and west, and recline with Abraham, and Isaac, and Jacob, in the kingdom of heaven. Here on the altar He sets His table before you, for you to partake in things the patriarchs could only dream about.

But we don't need to dream, we need to pray. God will hear, and God will answer, and God will bless if we simply trust Him and call upon Him. Jesus cares. His response to the leper tells us that. And Jesus can help. The Centurion and his talk about authority teach us that. Back in Bible times, Leprosy seemed too big and too hard. Paralysis seemed too big and too hard. But Jesus was able to handle both of them. The troubles of our lives are like the problems addressed in our Gospel today. When our Lord speaks, they will obey.

"True Faith and True Authority" Matthew 8:1-13 The 3rd Sunday after Epiphany

All you need is to know that God can, and trust that He wants to bless and to help, and call upon Him to do so. It is our turn to exercise true faith, and our Lord will exercise His true authority.

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.  
Amen.