

The story of the centurion and his terminally ill servant speaks to us on various levels. First, it is the story of an army officer who cares about a beloved servant. Deeper yet, it tells of a proud military leader who is so humble that he sends others to ask Jesus' aid. At still a deeper level, here is a foreigner who understands better than any of his day how far Jesus' authority extends and how it operates.

While Rome had its own troops garrisoned in Jerusalem and Caesarea, each of the petty kings who governed under the Romans also had military forces modelled on the Roman pattern. Since there was no Roman military presence in Galilee before AD 44, the centurion headquartered in Capernaum in our story would have been attached to the army of Herod Antipas who ruled the area. From the text it is clear that he is not a Jew, possibly he is a Roman centurion assigned to or seconded to Herod's army.[1]

Originally a centurion was in charge of 100 men, but in time the number varied. A centurion was a lower ranking officer, probably similar in the Roman hierarchy to the position of an army captain in our own. The ancient historian Polybius offers a list of qualifications looked for in centurions. They must be not so much "seekers after danger as men who can command, steady in action, and reliable; they ought not to be over anxious to rush into the fight; but when hard pressed they must be ready to hold their ground and die at their posts." [2] A centurion must be a man among men.

But the centurion posted to the Capernaum garrison is far more than just a military leader. The text reveals several remarkable things about his character.

He is deeply moved by the sickness and imminent death of a beloved servant. "Servant" sounds good to western ears, but he was probably a "slave" (Greek *doulos*). Obviously, though, he was more than just a servant, but a trusted friend. By his actions, you can observe the centurion's longing to see his servant well. Matthew's Gospel indicates that the servant was paralyzed and in terrible suffering. He may have had a stroke and is now just clinging to life.

The centurion is also deeply respected by the religious community in Capernaum. Though he is not Jewish, he is certainly sympathetic to the Jewish faith. "He loves our nation," the community elders tell Jesus, "and has built our synagogue." Apparently the centurion is a big donor to the synagogue building fund. For a non-Jew to get the leaders of the synagogue to "plead earnestly" with Jesus on his behalf says a lot about the esteem in which they held him. Respected Jews were often proud that they had no association with a non-Jew. This centurion was clearly an exception. He was obviously a seeker after the God of the Jews. They could see that and admired him for it. The centurion is depicted as a deeply humble man. Centurions don't lead by being bashful or self-effacing. Yet this centurion never actually appears personally before Jesus to plead his cause. Instead, he sends others in his place, not as a tactical move in order to get Jesus to agree to his request. Clearly it is because of a sense of personal unworthiness. The friends are told to say, "Lord, don't trouble yourself, for I do not deserve to have you come under my roof" (7:6b). No doubt the centurion knows the pious Jew's common refusal to enter a Gentile home. The centurion has a very clear sense of who Jesus is, and what his level of authority is. His humility is grounded in a profound respect for Jesus' position. In comparison, the centurion sees himself as unworthy to even invite Jesus to be a guest in his

home. And since he sees himself as undeserving, he is all the more aware of the pure grace with which Jesus operates.

Jesus pondered the words, "I am not worthy to have you come under my roof" and "I too am a man under authority with soldiers under me."

This man was a Roman soldier, a representative of Israel's enemy. And yet he understood what even these Jewish elders didn't yet grasp. "I tell you, not even in Israel have I found such faith"

Both Luke ([Luke 7:9](#)) and Matthew ([Matthew 8:10](#)) use the Greek word *thaumazo* (thou-mad'-zo) which we translate "marveled" or "amazed" to describe Jesus' response to the centurion's faith. The only time this word is used to describe Jesus' response to others' faith is in [Mark 6:6](#), when he marvels at the lack of faith in the people of Nazareth, where he grew up. The centurion was one of the most unlikely persons to amaze Jesus. He was a Gentile. Doubtless he had a pagan upbringing. He was a Roman, stationed in Palestine to subject the Jews to the Emperor's rule. So what in the world had happened to this man? We don't know. But there he is in Capernaum; a miracle of God's marvelous grace. And he's a first fruit and a foreshadow of what Jesus had come to bring about. He was a living illustration that "many [would] come from the east and west and recline at table with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven" ([Matthew 8:11](#)). This centurion is also a reminder to us that "man looks on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart" ([1 Samuel 16:7](#)). I think we will be surprised someday when Jesus doles out rewards. We sometimes misunderstand the real meaning of the word authority.

Only twice in all of Scripture was Jesus said to "marvel" or be amazed. The other time was when he began his public ministry in his hometown of Nazareth, and he was rejected by his fellow Jews – "he was amazed by their lack of faith." The centurion had a faith that was more perceptive and sensitive than anything Jesus had witnessed in Israel. What could be more horrible than to amaze the Son of God with one's lack of faith? What could be more thrilling than to amaze Him with one's faith. This centurion had amazing faith! We often find that it is in the most unexpected people and places that we see things that amaze us. The question we must think about is simple when we think about it. Are we prepared to be amazed or do we think we have seen it all?

The threefold sources of authority in Anglicanism are scripture, tradition, and reason. These three sources uphold and critique each other in a dynamic way. Scripture is the normative source for God's revelation and the source for all Christian teaching and reflection. Tradition passes down from generation to generation the church's ongoing experience of God's presence and activity. Reason is understood to include the human capacity to discern the truth in both rational and intuitive ways. It is not limited to logic as such. It takes into account and includes experience. Each of the three sources of authority must be perceived and interpreted in light of the other two.

The Anglican balance of authority has been characterized as a "three-legged stool" which falls if any one of the legs is not upright. It may be distinguished from a tendency in Roman Catholicism to overemphasize tradition relative to scripture and reason, and in certain Protestant churches to overemphasize scripture relative to tradition and reason. The Anglican balancing of the sources of authority has been criticized as clumsy or "muddy." It has been associated with the Anglican affinity

for seeking the mean between extremes and living the *via media*. It has also been associated with the Anglican willingness to tolerate and comprehend opposing viewpoints instead of imposing tests of orthodoxy or resorting to heresy trials. This balanced understanding of authority is based in the theology of Richard Hooker (c. 1554-1600). Amen.