

LUKE 7:1-10
SIMPLE FAITH

Do we need to see to believe? This weekend we are celebrating 60 years since Edmund Hillary and Tensing Norgay climbed Mount Everest. On one day last year, more than 230 climbers reached the summit, but in 1953 it had never been done before; it was revealed on the day of the coronation that it had been done! Why did people believe the story? They weren't there; they couldn't see. If it were to happen today, we'd have instant TV footage of the event, there would be a camera crew nearby, maybe even carrying their own camera, with a satellite phone to tell the world all at once and we'd be able to see! There was none of that in 1953; word went round the world that it had been done and people believed and only then, afterwards, did we see the evidence: Pathe News, photos from the summit, showing Hillary and Tensing on top of the world; we saw it then, but we had believed it before!

Do we need to see before we believe? Faith is a simple thing in some ways, but we make it much more complicated than we need to! It is the quality at the heart of being a Christian; no matter where you open your Bible you will see faith being talked about: stories are told about people of faith to inspire us; people are blamed for their lack of faith and losing their way; we are given reasons to have faith. The key part of being a Christian is faith; we can't always describe it or explain it, but it is the key to being a Christian. What we do today in our worship is designed to help us grow in our faith: by listening to the Bible we learn about faith by hearing, we also see in bread and wine another reason to believe and by seeing and tasting, our faith in Jesus is made stronger. People sometimes say that if people saw they would have more faith; if the church did more miracles that people could see, they would have more faith; but the miracles that Jesus did divided opinion even then: some believed and others turned away.

At first sight, the man whose story we read today is an unlikely candidate for faith. He is an outsider, from another culture, a Roman soldier, a centurion, a middle-ranking soldier living in Capernaum. He would take his orders from the Roman HQ at Caesarea and would have men under his command, peace-keeping troops based in the town. He had developed a respect for the local people, for the Jews and for their religion, so much so that when his servant falls ill, the Jews help him and go to work on his behalf. He has faith; his faith is seen in what he did. We are not told where his faith came from, but are left to wonder that it came from his time in Capernaum, getting to know these Jewish believers and perhaps listening to Jesus on other occasions. His servant is ill: *"the centurion..." (Luke 7:3f)* He believes that Jesus can help, that He can heal. His faith is in Jesus and no-one else!

It's what happens next that astonishes even Jesus! Another servant is sent to Jesus: *"lord, don't..." (Luke 7:6ff)* Wow! "Just say the word, Jesus! I know it will happen!" Jesus has the power and authority to heal; the centurion believes that and his actions reflect his faith. He believes that Jesus can heal his servant without even seeing him, or being in the same room as him; "just say the word" and it will be done. He lives with that kind of power and authority every day: as a middle-ranking officer with soldiers under his command, he sees it from both sides; he is given orders and expected to obey them at once and he issues orders that he expects others to obey without question. So he believes that Jesus can say the word and it will be done; that kind of power and authority belongs to Jesus as Lord. His faith is rewarded; the servant is healed. More, his faith is

commended: *“when Jesus...” (Luke 7:9)* Whenever his story is told now, his faith is held up for us as an example of faith in Jesus. His is the best faith that Jesus has found.

Faith in Jesus: I was in WH Smith’s bookshop the other day; there was a section of books on “health and spirituality”. There were all kinds of books about how to be better person, books on hypnotherapy and so on; then I saw section of books called bibles; but there was the Tarot Bible and others. Finally I managed to find a Christian Bible and a few Christian books at the bottom of the stack. Where do we put our faith? In whom do we trust for health and salvation? There are so many choices for people today: there is a religious marketplace out there and even atheists have meetings to promote their atheism; it is hard for people to know where to turn. Christian faith is centred on Jesus, or should be. Jesus is the centre of our faith; He is the One in whom we trust; He is the centre of God’s plans to bless the world. It is not faith in the church, or in a ministers, or in a set of traditions, on in “the new way” whatever that is; it is faith in Jesus Christ. The bread and wine of communion focuses our attention on Jesus: it was Jesus who was crucified and it is Jesus who was raised on the third day; it is Jesus who is able to save us completely; we say it again and often, that it is faith in Jesus Christ that gives us life, salvation, grace and all the blessings of God.

Humble faith: *“I do not deserve...”* I have met lots of people who have said that about communion; “I don’t deserve” and that has kept them away from the Lord’s Table; they see their faults and weaknesses and their deep sense of unworthiness has kept them away, sometimes even away from Jesus completely. I have also met people who have been blasé about their faith, not really taking much care over it. The best is somewhere in between. Humble faith sees our weaknesses and recognises what we don’t deserve anything from God and marvels that God has blessed us with His grace in spite of us, in spite of our faults, weaknesses and sense of unworthiness. We must always approach worship with humility and approach communion with humility – it was for us that Jesus died; it was our sins that put Jesus on the cross; it was to take away our sin that Jesus died. “I don’t deserve” said the centurion, and then he came to Jesus and Jesus blessed him; the gospel and the communion service is not about what we deserve, but it is about what God gives us in His grace. We have a sense of unworthiness and we come to Jesus.

Faith finds its reward: Can we believe what we can’t see? I can’t see that my sins are forgiven; there is nothing to prove it. I can’t see Jesus; He is not physically present beside me. But I believe that my sins are forgiven and I believe that the Spirit of Jesus is with me. Why? Because I trust the One who tells me that my sins are forgiven and I trust the One who promises that the Spirit is with me everywhere I go. That faith is rewarded; God keeps His promises. Jesus hears the centurion’s prayers and answers them and his servant is healed from a distance; Jesus hears our prayers and answers them, sometimes in similar ways, sometimes in different ways, but He answers our prayers and gives us grace.

Faith in Jesus, a humble faith, faith finding its reward: this is faith at its best. A most surprising man, an outsider, from another culture, yet he had the best faith Jesus had found. Faith in Jesus, a humble faith, faith finding its reward – food for thought!