

MATTHEW 8:5-15
 “I DON’T DESERVE...”

Power scares us in our world. We become anxious about people who wield power and authority over us, none more so that this Tuesday, with the US election of a president. It has been frightening to watch the campaign, how both candidates have behaved and the thought that, by Wednesday, one of them will be elected to hold the most powerful office in the world (they say) is a frightening thought for most people. We see people abuse power: Robert Mugabe in Zimbabwe has used his office and the authority that comes with it to amass a small fortune in a Swiss bank, while the people of his country become poorer and poorer and some starve. Corruption in high places is endemic in so many countries of the world that it is simply accepted, but we must never accept that kind of twisting of power; we must fight against it and speak up for those who can’t speak for themselves. In our society, we must always hold to account those who hold power, so that they are honest and fair and faithful.

When we begin to talk about Jesus as a man with power and authority, where does that leave us? Do we bring our view of power from the world into our way of seeing Jesus? We say “of course not!” but it’s not always as easy as that. Matthew’s big theme in his gospel is “the kingdom of God or heaven”: Jesus has come to bring the kingdom of God into the world in a new way. It is not a kingdom you will find on a map, but the kingdom (or kingship) of God is about God being King and having authority over His people. “Jesus is Lord” was the earliest Christian confession of faith and it gives to Jesus much the same sense of power and authority over us, so that we listen to Him and obey Him. When we talk about Jesus as Lord, we can come with a suspicion of that idea, a suspicion created by what we see in power around us. Is Jesus tarred with the same brush, so that He uses His power is used in ways that are corrupt and harsh? Is Jesus out simply to make people bend to His way? We want to say “no” to all of these suspicions! Here’s a story that helps us.

The story today is about a Roman soldier. He was a centurion, a junior officer in charge of a group of men who are probably on peace-keeping duties in Israel. They are probably under the command of Herod Antipas and are probably drawn from Lebanon and Syria, so our man is described as an “interested neighbour”. He is based in Capernaum, Jesus’ home town by this stage; Jesus travelled around, but at this time in His life, He still came home from time to time. The soldier has a servant who is sick, paralysed, and he wants Jesus to heal his servant and as we said earlier, the soldier is content for Jesus to do that from a distance. “*Just say...*” (*Matthew 8:8*) That is, of course, what happened; Jesus healed the servant and something of His power was demonstrated again in a miracle. “*Go! It...*” (*Matthew 8:13*) We know the servant was paralysed, but not for how long; we don’t even know his name, but his story lives on as an example to us of the power of Jesus to heal by the speaking of a word.

“*I don’t...*” (*Matthew 8:8*) Jesus offered to go to the centurion’s house to heal his servant. That’s a huge offer! Jews didn’t do that! It was against the law for Jews to go to the house of a Gentile; it would make them unclean! But here is Jesus offering to come to his house in order to heal his servant. The soldier doesn’t deserve that kind of blessing; Jesus in his house! There might be two reasons for that: first, our soldier is a foreigner, a visitor in Israel and he has picked up enough to know that he is seen as a second-class citizen in the eyes of the Jews; secondly, he probably sees something of Jesus and knows that this man is far too good to come to the house of humble man who has sinned and is by no means perfect. “*I don’t...*” (*Matthew 8:8*) Jesus is not put off; He heals the servant and blesses the centurion for his faith.

This man is by no means unique: “*I don’t deserve...*” how often have I heard people say that about their relationship with God and often it means that they stay away from Jesus! They have a deep sense that they don’t deserve His blessing and that becomes a barrier to receiving it. In our history in Scotland’s church we have got this horribly wrong and it became most clear at communion time. Ministers and elders for many generations “fenced the tables” of

communion and you had to prove to these men that you were worthy of your communion token and your place at table. So many people were turned away because it was thought that they didn't deserve to be there, in the eyes of those who had the power. Communion became about "my worth and what I deserve" rather than what it really is, a place to celebrate the grace of God. People grew up with a sense of "*I don't deserve...*", and that became a barrier to Jesus! Our fathers have a great deal to answer for in that regard.

Paul in Ephesians 2 writes about this "*I don't deserve...*" way of thinking and says that it is absolutely right! We don't deserve! We have lived in ways that are sinful, wrong and deserving only of God's wrath! That is Paul's verdict on every one of us; none of us really deserves anything from God because we have all sinned. "*But God...*" (Ephesians 2:4) Grace is all about God giving us what we don't deserve. We deserve one thing, but God gives us something else. We deserve judgement but God forgives us our sins; we deserve wrath but God gives us salvation. God gives us the very blessing we don't deserve and gives it to us because of Jesus and for faith. This whole way of thinking is turned on its head by Jesus. "*I don't deserve...*" Yes, we know that, but here is blessing regardless of that! It is so hard to change this way of thinking, but this is the gospel; this is what God wants for us, to be able to say "*I don't deserve...*" and for that to be a matter of celebration; "I don't deserve, but see what God has done anyway; see what God has given; glory be to Jesus!"

"*When Jesus...*" (Matthew 8:10) Who belongs to Jesus's kingdom? What allows us in? The answer - faith! That's the key to all the blessing of God, to our belonging to Jesus – faith! It is as simple as that! But that's not how it was seen by those who might have been watching Jesus or listening to Him and when He talks about people who "*Come from...*" (Matthew 8:11) He is changing the goal-posts. The Jews thought that they were all "sons of the kingdom" and they belonged because of their race; because they were Jews their place was guaranteed. People who were not Jews had no place at the table, in their way of thinking! They tried every way that they could to keep non-Jews outside and reminded them at every available opportunity that they did not belong. Jesus changed the goal-posts. By His way of thinking, people belonged to God by their faith. He commends the soldier for his faith, faith the likes of which Jesus has not seen in anyone else; faith that was shown by the soldier's understanding of Jesus's power and authority. "*Just say...*" (Matthew 8:8) Here is a man who comes from the outside, but is coming inside to share with the great heroes of Israel's faith and sit with them at God's great banquet!

I've not really ever known a time when I was not part of the Church. I rebelled a bit as a teenager, against going to church when my parents wanted me to go and I was the only one of my age, but that rebellion was fairly tame! Then there was the time when I came to faith for myself rather than an inherited faith from my parents. It is a familiar story! I'm glad to rejoice in God's grace to me in that story. What happens when someone comes who has not had that long background of church and inherited faith, but wants to know about Jesus and wants to be part of the church? Do we send them away and want to keep them out because they don't understand and haven't belong to church for as long as I have? The gospel tells us that the answer to that question is "no!" We don't chase people away; we don't keep them out; we give them a place at the table beside us and welcome them to share the same grace of God that blesses us! God's grace is for everyone.

Faith is the only key to open the door to experience grace. There is no other door that opens in that direction. Grace does not come to us because we have been members of a church for 50 years, or because our parents brought us up to come to church, or because we think we live in a Christian country. All of these 'doors' open to brick walls! "*I have...*" (Matthew 8:10) Faith, for Jesus, was the key to open the door into the kingdom and this man has a place at the table alongside Abraham, Isaac and Jacob; a junior officer in the Roman army, an "interested neighbour", a man of faith. Faith opened the door to the whole blessing of God for this man and he was given everything; he thought he deserved nothing, but he was given all

that he asked for and far more besides. His faith was rewarded; his prayers were answered; his servant was healed.

Jesus has the power to save. Jesus has the authority to forgive sins. When He died and was raised, Jesus achieved all of that. He is able to save us completely; He is able to bring us to God and to bring the whole of God's blessing to us. He has the authority to forgive sins, to say to us "Your sins are forgiven" and mean it! You'll say to me "preacher, I don't deserve..." and I'll agree with you; none of us deserves these gifts from God. But God gives; these are ours; this is grace. God gives us what we don't deserve. "I don't deserve..." – will that be a barrier between you and Jesus? Or will it be an opportunity for you to understand and experience grace? Grace is God's love to people who don't deserve it; none of us deserves, but God gives anyway. "I don't deserve..." said Roman soldier, but Jesus answered his prayers and gave him grace. Grace is for everyone; for you, for me, for all of us! Glory be to Jesus!