

MATTHEW 8:5-17
SUCH GREAT FAITH!

There is a whole industry attached to publishing books; who designs the cover? The cover will tell you something about the book: a picture that represents the title of the book, or some of its main themes, or the place in which the book is set, or a picture of the main character in the book. Lots of money, time and effort, I assume, are spent to get just the right cover for the book and the right image. Sometimes the connection between the book and its cover is obvious; other times, it is a bit more tenuous. You know the saying “never judge a book by its cover”! I wonder how much attention the publishing and design industry pay to that saying; do they take any notice of it and think that people shouldn’t judge the book by the cover? Of course, the main thing about any book is the story it tells; the contents of the book are what really makes it successful or not! The most exciting cover in the world, with the most boring book – it will fail! The most boring cover, with the most exciting story – it will be a bestseller once word gets around!

Well, that saying “never judge a book by its cover” is not really used about books. It is used more about people. It is so easy to make that mistake. I was once in Lothian Road, and an elderly lady struggling up towards Castle Terrace and wanting to cross the street. A young man came up behind her and was obviously going to speak to her. He was wearing ripped jeans, had a Mohican haircut, some piercings in his face, wearing large boots and I remember feeling afraid for the woman as I saw this unfold from a distance. When he spoke to the woman, of course, he offered to help her across the street, carry her bags for her and was perfectly polite, a nice young man. I made the mistake: I judged the book by the cover; I judged the person by what he looked like on the outside and had written him off as a danger to society; in fact, he was the very opposite.

What do we see when we look around us at our society, at our community? Let’s put this into a Church context. We see people who appear to have no interest in Church or Christian faith; we see people whose values and standards appear to be very different from those that we would espouse or commend; we see people who appear to be apathetic towards the gospel. When we see that, the tendency is to write them off as beyond the pale. Or consider someone who does come through doors of building and doesn’t know how to behave in Church, who doesn’t know when to stand and when to sit; what to do and when; or consider someone who comes and suggests to us a different way of doing church or being church. I didn’t see it, but I gather that in the BBC programme *Reverse Missionaries* from Blantyre where a Malawian pastor came to the church where his hero David Livingstone grew up, wasn’t always treated with open arms and his ideas did not always find a good welcome. Was that because he was different? Did he not tick the boxes?

Matthew tells the story of a Roman centurion in Capernaum. We’ve said before that Capernaum was home-town for Jesus now; this was His base. One day, going home, He is met by this Roman centurion. What did people see when they met this man? They saw a Roman soldier, a rough, tough man; had he seen a few battles in his time? They certainly saw a foreigner, an outsider, a Gentile living in this Galilean town; was there Roman camp nearby? The Jews didn’t like Gentiles; they thought them on the same level as women and dogs, to be despised and rejected. To be completely fair, in Luke’s version of this story, some of the Jewish leaders in the town tell Jesus about this man, that “*He loves...*” (*Luke 7:5*) So they saw a man who had done some good things; who

had given some of his money to help the community by building the synagogue and in their eyes that meant he was worthy of Jesus' help. There are mixed messages in what people saw in this man.

The Centurion has a problem; his servant is sick. *"Lord, my..." (8:6)* He came asking Jesus for help. This is the second of three healing stories in this section of Matthew's gospel and all of them are about 'outsiders': a leper who was forced to leave his home and live on the edge of society, shunned by his community lest they become infected; the third is a woman, Peter's mother-in-law and we don't really have much idea of the status of women then; they were no more than goods and chattels. So here is Jesus healing a leper, a Gentile soldier and a woman. He is pushing the boundaries, accepting people that the culture would hold at arms' length, welcoming and blessing people whom the Jews would not have countenanced. The Centurion comes looking for help, asking Jesus to heal his servant. That in itself says something about this man, because servants were slaves, goods and chattels again, usually just thrown out when they were past their usefulness; but here is a man concerned for his servant; he has a good heart.

Jesus said *"I..." (8:7)* This may not be quite what the NIV makes it seem. Some suggest that this is better read as a question with the emphasis on 'I'. "Am I to come and cure him? Do you know what you are asking, that I as a Jew should come to the house of a Gentile? Do you understand what you are asking?" Don't take this as Jesus' being reluctant, but He knows the culture; He knows that the community might be troubled, that there might be ructions for the centurion because he has broken the Jewish taboos. We see from elsewhere that Jesus didn't hold with these taboos; He saw His mission from God as being for everyone, that the blessing of God was for all nations and He was quite ready to tackle these taboos; but that doesn't mean it was easy!

The Centurion's answer is extraordinary! *"Lord, I..." (8:8f)* "Say the word". Wow! He is a figure of authority in the army; the army needs it. The Centurion says to his men "jump" and their only question has to be "how high?" He issues an order and the men under his command obey it; they may not understand it, they may not like it, but they do it. He sees Jesus with the same kind of authority; *"Say the..." (8:8)* Whether or not Jesus comes to his house, or even should come to his house, is totally irrelevant for the centurion. Jesus can heal his servant with a word! What an extraordinary thing to say.

The Jews saw a soldier, a Gentile outsider, yet a man who did some good things for the community. What did Jesus see? *"I tell..." (8:10)* Faith here has been described as "an absolute practical reliance on Jesus' power". (France) He believed utterly that Jesus could heal his servant and do it with a word. There was no doubt in his mind about the ability of Jesus to give him the help for which he was looking. "Say the word" is an expression of the faith that was in his heart. Jesus saw a man with good heart, with faith, and to the dismay of all the local Jews told them that this Roman soldier, this Gentile outsider, had greater faith than anyone else He had met: *"I have..." (8:10)* Faith, that which lives in a person's heart – that is what Jesus wants to see; that's what Jesus is looking for; it is faith that opens up the blessing of God and the servant is healed: *"Go! It...!" (8:13)* Jesus saw the man's heart, what was inside and was delighted; he is a man of faith, a good man; for Jesus, that is all that mattered!

The Church in Ephesus is described in Revelation chapter 2; what did people see of that Church? Well, it was a busy Church – *"I know..." (Rev 2:2f)* It was a Church that had done well in the circumstances, that had kept going when everything round about was

hard; they had persevered when faced with hardships, they had not grown weary in doing good and keeping going. On the outside, it was a successful church. It was quite orthodox in what the Christians there believed, and they sorted out their problems in a way that was good and right. It was a busy, successful, orthodox Church. That's what people looking at the Church in Ephesus see. But what did Jesus see? This letter comes from Jesus by the Spirit inspiring the apostle John in exile on Patmos; there are letters to seven churches in Turkey, describing what Jesus sees in His Church. So to the Ephesus Church He says: "Yet, I..." (2:4) Something is not right inside, the church has lost its passion, its devotion and this has probably to be seen in two ways: they lost their passion for Jesus and devotion to Him and they lost their love for one another. On the outside, everything is fine; inside, something is not right, and they are an empty, dead, loveless, passionless people.

All of this raises two questions for us: How do we look at other people? Go back to what I said earlier and how we look at people in our community: we see people who appear uninterested in Church and faith. Yet, listen to them and you find people who will talk about the big issues of life and the big issues of faith, but people who are not sure how to find their way into Church or if they want to find their way into traditional patterns of Church. We can find ourselves measuring people up to see if they tick all of our boxes and if they do, we accept them; if they don't, we won't. I well remember the tremors that went through Church when some women started going to the Sunday morning service without wearing a hat; there were very real questions in some people's minds about their acceptability. How do we think? Are we still going to judge people by the cover? By what they look like? By what they seem to be on the outside? Are we still going to decide on these grounds that some are outsiders, and not accepted because they disturb and disrupt us or because they are different? Or are we ready to listen to them and find out what they are really like? What bothers them? What Church and faith means to them?

The second question: what does Jesus see in us? They call us a busy Church; "there's a lot going on in Juniper Green!" That's what they say about us! That is the verdict of two ladies I overheard on the 44 bus! The danger of a busy Church is that we lose the passion, and our devotion to Jesus because we simply want to keep "the busy" going! Or in an attempt to keep "the busy" we forget to love and care for one another. What we're like inside matters more; it matters more that in the heart of the Church there is a passion for Jesus, a devotion to Jesus that nothing will shake; and that there is a love for one another that runs deep, caring for one another in a genuine spirit of love. We need to ask the same question of us individually: what does Jesus see in us? Faith? Trust in His promises, His love, and His power? That's what He wants to see in us; the quality of the person matters most, that we are people of faith, people who love.

As the Roman Centurion walked down Main Street, Capernaum, people saw a soldier, maybe with scars on his face; they saw an outsider, someone who does not really belong, who had come from somewhere else. What did Jesus see as He met the same man? He saw a man who loved his servant enough to come to Jesus for help; He saw a man of faith, of greater and deeper faith than He had seen in anyone else. "Never judge a book by its cover!" There is more going on in the hearts and minds of the people you meet than you will ever know; it is far too easy to write people off as uninterested and apathetic; talk to them, listen to their story and to their questions and you will begin to see something of their heart. Jesus sees our hearts: what does He see? Does He see people of faith and love?