

Sunday reflection for Sunday the 13th February:

TRUST: A Tale of Two Cultural Rebels

Luke 7:1-10

When we were Children,
....our Parents wanted to show us off to the whole world

Dress us up
(especially for anniversary day in Pisgah for many of you)

List our sporting or school achievements.

Hope that people would comment on how polite,
....and well mannered we were.

A real credit to mum and dad.

But did they ever warn you about hanging out,
..... in the wrong kind of company,
= and thus become led astray?

“Don’t go about with so and so -
....they’ll only drag you down with them,
.....get you into trouble.”

Perhaps what they also meant (but possibly didn’t say out loud) was-
...DON’T SPOIL IT FOR US,
.....BRING TROUBLE TO OUR DOOR,
.....AND MAKE US LOOK LIKE BAD PARENTS.

MY Dad was very relaxed in general -

...he rarely raised his voice,
.....and wasn't the spanking sort

But he made it clear to my brother and I,
...that if we ever embarrassed him in public,
.....there's be no more cinema treats,
.....or trips to the newsagent for pop and choc'

AND WHILE DAD WAS PRETTY FRUGAL WITH HIS DISCIPLINE -
...neither of us wanted to get on his bad side (he had this stern stare)
.....and his threats were few,
.....but experience taught us, they were never idle.

MOST PARENTS WANT TO BE PROUD OF THEIR CHILDREN -
...they want them to be respectable.

And so each family and society -
...has a set of RULES and EXPECTATIONS,
.....for it's members,

= and these are drummed into us from a very early stage.
So that we grow up to 'fit in' and 'be respectable'.

Jesus would have experienced all these pressures too –
...actually it would have been MUCH STRICTER for him..

Growing up in a family that had its roots in the
... highly religious Pharisee tradition.

And so he'd have received copious amounts of instruction,
... in the do's and don'ts of social and religious society.

ALL THE PROPER PROTOCOLS AND ETIQUETTE.

Which is what makes EVENTS like today's,
...all the more surprising for those first eye witnesses.

Because he seems to spend his whole ministry,
....defying etiquette,
.....tramping over half of his society's taboos

=and defying people's expectations in the process –
...especially their expectations that involve how a good Jewish boy,
..... should go about relating to others.

One of the biggest INTERACTIONAL TABOOS of course,
..was never speak to women who are non-family members
(partly to avoid potential sin – and partly because they weren't seen as important enough in 1st
century Jewish society)

Jesus didn't just break this taboo –
...he jumped up and down on it in relish!

He spoke to strangely behaved women,
..loose women (including the professional kind of course),
...Foreign women,

.....even (in case of woman at the well)
= foreign, loose, HERETIC, women.

*He touched ritually AND physically unclean people
(most shockingly the lepers)

*He dined with corrupt thieving civil servants,

*and he even gave children

(considered the least in his society and worthy of no consideration) –
= his fullest attention and respect.

We know from the gospel story,

...where Jesus brothers and mum tried to extract him from a group of followers for what they perceived was his own good,

= that his Mother worried about him

- and despite everything she heard prophesied earlier,

.....probably didn't fully understand everything he was about

But we discovered in our text today,

.... that he's not the only rebel in Palestine...

We meet somebody else who seems to have been equally as busy, –breaking all of his social taboos and cultural expectations

....A JEW LOVING,

SYNAGOGUE BUILDING,

SLAVE RESPECTING MILITARY ROMAN OPPRESSOR!

I bet his mum had her share of sleepless nights too!

Let's take a look at this man who,

...as they say in America – 'grew up on the other side of the tracks'

But who NEVERTHELESS,

.....had quite a bit in common with Jesus –

= or at least his penchant for surprising people.

PAUSE -

I think growing up,
... and studying ancient Roman history at school –
..... colouring in all those shiny uniforms,

and hearing my history teacher,
... praise their advanced civilisation,
..... and its shaping effect on the modern world

= Has led me to underestimate,
..... just how despised they were among the Jews.

Perhaps imagining how a French person,
..... in occupied France under the Nazis,
..... might perceive a stormtrooper walking past their home,

= might give us some insight,
..... into how the Jews perceived their occupying force.

Simply put --

= they hated them.

(both Jewish and Roman historians were pretty clear on that fact).

Several times groups took up arms against the occupying power,
... and some members,
..... used to carry a dagger hidden in their clothes,

= ready to stab a Roman in the back in the crowd.

They were the original terrorists –

... and history tells us that these attacks,
..... were extremely frequent in occupied Palestine.

The Romans, in their turn --
... hated and feared the Jews,
this cycle of hate and fear would eventually culminate,
..... in the complete destruction of Jerusalem.

The Jews were often characterised in Roman culture,
..... as a filthy race –

= and their religion was described as barbarous superstition.

They spread unfounded rumours,
... that the Jews worshipped a donkey's head,
..... and made an annual sacrifice of a non-Jew to their God.

Anti-Semitism is nothing new.

Now compare this historical reality,
... to the scene we read in today's passage.

I have never had the privilege of going to the holy land
(although it's one of the things on my bucket list –
... you know
= those things you'd like to do before you kick the bucket, list!)

So although I haven't seen it first hand,
... my Bible Atlas tells me that if you visited Capernaum today,
= you'd see the white marble remains of a synagogue there.

But these remains date a little later than the time of Jesus.

Yet underneath it,

...you can see the foundations of its predecessor --
= the so-called 'black synagogue',

...where Jesus worshipped, preached and healed.

Luke's gospel tells us,
... that the construction of the black synagogue at Capernaum,
..... was paid for by the Roman Centurion.

This man so loved the nation of Israel and its spirituality,
... that he had paid for their synagogue out of his own money.

And so he had won the affection and respect,
.... of the local elders –

= there were no knives hidden behind cloaks,
.... in his presence –

instead his neighbours,
.... carried expressions of concern and helpfulness

“and when they came to Jesus, they begged him earnestly, saying that the one for whom he should do this (heal his servant) was deserving” (vs 4)

putting aside for a moment,
.... the unique fondness and spiritual affinity,
.....he had with the people and the land he was based in --

Q -what kind of people (more generally speaking),
..... became Roman Centurions?

Forgive the historical recap –
.. but of course centurions were in charge of 100 soldiers;

=they roughly corresponded to a regimental sergeant major,
..... in a modern army.

A Roman historian wrote,

... that centurions 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 the hard-pressed they must be ready to hold their ground and die at their post'

A centurion has to be trusted by those above him,

.....and by those over whom he has command

.....And vice versa -- he has to be able to trust them.

In fact this trait --

... this ability to trust in one's comrades,

..... was thought to be one of the unifying elements,

.....that made their armies so potent and all-conquering.

Especially as so many of their enemies

(even when in greater numbers)

... were less disciplined and cohesive

so OUR centurion -

= was a man who knew how to trust those,

..... he recognised as worthy of it.

This trusting man -- who should have been hated,

.....but was actually well respected by the locals,

= Has a slave who is ill -- at death's door

... which brings us to another odd feature of the text.

The Roman Empire was based on slavery --

... and this centurion was fond of his.

Normally, when a slave couldn't work --

... he was thrown out to die

(like we might put a ropey old dishwasher in the garden, with the intention of taking it to the tip....

...there's no point keeping it in the house any more)

the Centurion was so upset,

.... they sent messengers asking Jesus to heal the lad

(he didn't go in person,

... because it was commonly known that the Jews,

..... didn't invite non-Jews into their homes)

of course this didn't worry Jesus-

... and he set out to visit the centurion's billet,

when he heard this,

... the centurion sent a message telling him not to bother --

"I have soldiers under my command, and slaves in my household," he wrote to Jesus,

"when I tell them to come, they come straight away; or if I order them to go somewhere, they go without question. The same with you: you have the authority, and if you tell of the illness to leave my boy, it'll do what you tell it."

And of course we know the outcome --

... we know that his trust wasn't misplaced.

What a breath of fresh air this was to Jesus

Jesus had met so many people,

- who had demanded to see signs before they trust him,
- engaged in lengthy theological debate with him,

and when they did see the signs,

- they tried to claim they were daemonic in nature (after all only Satan would break the sabbath by easing somebody suffering)

and when Jesus answered their questions,

... they didn't really listen to his answers,

= but instead came back with yet more questions,

..... which were designed to try and trap him,

..... into incriminating himself

(not unlike the scenes we see today in the House of Commons)

Even Jesus' followers --

whom he loved,

... had the up and down faith of a child's yo-yo!

Jesus was so taken aback,

.... by the trust and the humility of this authority figure,

(somebody who should have been quite the opposite towards a wandering Jewish rabbi)

=That he wins an incredibly glowing commendation --

"I say to you --

...I have not found such great faith --

.....not even in Israel."

Without meaning to,

....the centurion effectively shows up those,

..... who should have known better

And he received both a healed servant and a glowing tribute

... from this man Jesus.

This passage deliberately holds up those,
.... who should have known better,
.....and compares them to somebody
.....nobody expected to know better -
= but did.

Those who were supposedly in,
..... with someone who was supposedly out

Q - perhaps it continues to provide the same kind of challenge to us?
I know a lady from North Pembrokeshire who grew up a PAGAN.

Her mother describes herself as a white witch,
...and taught her daughter to look down upon Christianity,
.....as a false religion that only seeks to hurt and control people.

SHE now attends EMMANUEL CHURCH in Haverfordwest.

She has a deep and sincere faith -
...and she believes passionately that caring for others,
.....rather than just talking about caring for others,
.....is an incredibly important part of her Christian expression.

PERHAPS she is the modern equivalent of that Centurion -
...somebody who didn't have the advantage of Sunday school,
.....and a parents loving guidance in the faith,

= but LIVES OUT HER FAITH,
....in a way that perhaps puts some other Christians to shame.

It's important to always translate the text into our context -
...and culturally speaking,

.....we are in the shoes of the JEWS,
.....not the CENTURION

How do we compare our faith – our trust
.. to that of the centurions (the outsider)?

Do we trust JESUS?

... Do we believe that he knows what is best for us,
.....and that he is leading us there,
.....even though our walk can be hard sometimes,
..... and suffering is close at hand?

Even though we walk through the valley of the shadow of death?

I'll just finish with a 10 second story,
... that I heard another preacher tell once;

a small boy was on an aeroplane,
(the weather was a bit rough and the ride a bit bumpy)

A stranger --
..sitting nearby,
... thinking to comfort him,

Lent forward and asked him 'is this your first flight?
... 'are you feeling frightened?'
'oh no' -- answered the boy confidently,
... 'you see my daddy is the pilot'
Pause...

AMEN.