

What does it take for Jesus to come to us? Not what does it take Jesus, but what does it take us for Jesus to come to us? What has to happen to us or in us for us to allow or to even ask Jesus (like the Centurion in Our Gospel) to come to us?

Let me say first that my real concern is that this happening that needs to happen to us is not readily found in what today has become organized religion. And although St Michaels is blessed, pretty un-organized we are still what has become organized religion.

So let's see what we can learn from our gospel story today about this "happening"- what we might learn from the Centurion in our Gospel today.

He was a gentile, an outsider to the Jewish organized religion of the day. He was probably from elsewhere sent there to maintain the Roman Empire. He was evidently a thoughtful, caring and compassionate person.

He sends to Jesus because of his concern for his slave. Our translation says that he "valued highly" this slave, which does raise the question: did he value and respect him, another human being, or did he only value his productivity and therefore only truly value himself? The King James translation is helpful here. It says "a certain centurion's servant who was dear to him." The Greek literally says "a slave to whom he was honorable" So, it does seem that the Centurion is sincere, which confirms the estimation of the locals: *"He is worthy of having you do this..."*

So again what has happened to this Roman occupier that has allowed him to see this insignificant slave, this small cog in the local economy, to see him, honored, dear, a valuable human being?

One thing that stands out is that the Centurion seems to have a different assessment of himself than the others. They tell Jesus *"he is worthy of having you do this for him,"* and yet, when Jesus gets near, the Centurion sends the opposite message, *"I am not worthy to have you come under my roof."*

I was struck this week with Richard Rohr's understanding of what he considers to be a real missing piece of society in general and organized religion in particular. That missing piece he says is functional initiation rites.

He writes:

In my cross-cultural research on initiation rites, I have observed five consistent lessons communicated to the initiate. These lessons are meant to separate initiates from their thoughts about themselves and reattach them to who they really are. [Every have a need for that? To separate me from my thoughts about me, and reattach me to who I really am.]

Rohr continues:

These messages are essential for a [us] to know experientially if [we are] to be rightly aligned with reality.

He then list five messages. Here they are:

1. Life is hard.
2. You are not that important.
3. Your life is not about you.
4. You are not in control.
5. You are going to die.

You can see why these messages don't tend to show up in organized, consumer religion. They don't sell.

Back to the Centurion. I think what happened to the Centurion that allowed him to ask Jesus to come to him (truly to him, to his true self not some reality-detached thought about himself) was that he had been properly initiated into life. He knew in his life, not just in his head, that 1. Life is hard. That 2. He is not that important. That 3. His life is not about him. That 4. He is not in control. And that 5. He is going to die.

I want to focus on the middle 3. I am assuming that as a Roman soldier (like all those we remember this weekend), he knew well enough that life is hard and that he was going to die.

So, let's look at the Centurion's self-understanding.

*I also am a man under authority.* He tells Jesus. "I understand, Jesus, that I am not that important. I know where I fit in in the overall scheme of things.

*I say to one, 'Go,' and he goes... to my slave, 'Do this,' and the slave does it.*” “I know, Jesus, that my life is not about me. It is about our common life together. The way we all fit and work together.”

“I am, therefore, not in control. The common life (in this case the common life of the Roman empire) living in me and through me in my place in the empire is what is in control.

And Jesus stops and looks at the crowd and says:

*“I tell you, not even in Israel have I found such faith.”*

Faith is not trying really, really hard to believe something you hope is true.

Faith is being properly attached to reality: Knowing that I am not that important, that my life is not about me, and that I am not in control. Faith is understanding these things. Ever thought about the word understanding? To understand is to stand under – to stand under and therefore in right relationship to Reality. Faith is standing in the right place properly situated in and sharing in our common life, sharing in true life, sharing in and through you the real life of the world.

In our case it is not the life of the Roman Empire that lives in and through us. It is nothing less than the life of God – the life we call the kingdom or Reign of God.

Rohr concludes.

Once you know that your life is not about you, then you can also trust that your life is your message. This gives you an amazing confidence about your own small life—precisely because it is no longer a small life, it is no longer just yours, and it is not all in your head. Henceforth, you do not try to think yourself into a new way of living, but you first live in a new way, from a new vantage point—and your thinking changes by itself.

It is no accident that the prayer of the Centurion became the old traditional prayer used to ask Jesus to come to us in Holy Communion:

“Lord, I am not worthy that you should come under the roof of my house, but speak the word, and your servant shall be healed.”

In God’s Name. Amen.