

This morning's gospel follows on from Jesus' Sermon on the Mount. The final words of chapter 7 describe the sense of authority which the crowds sensed in Jesus: 'When Jesus finished saying these things, the crowds were amazed by his teaching, because he taught them like one who had authority, not like their experts in the law' (Matthew 7:28-29). It is this authority that leads both the leper and the centurion to approach Jesus; they approach with confidence, humility and faith, three characteristics we will explore this morning.

It's important to remember who wrote this Gospel. It was written by Matthew, a Jew and also a tax-collector. As a Jew, Matthew would have very strong feelings about both lepers, and as we shall see in the next story, Roman soldiers. To a Jewish person, a leper was a great sinner. God only punished people because of their sin, and there was no punishment greater than the punishment of leprosy.

But as a tax collector, Matthew would understand the feelings of being an outcast. He would have felt the sting of rejection and the looks of disgust given by people who didn't understand. Imagine the scene, as this unclean leper, someone to be feared by the community as contagious and a sinner, is found crying out to Jesus 'Lord, if you choose, you can make me clean.'

This shows the leper's confidence; he has no doubt that, if Jesus wills, Jesus can make him clean. He had perfect confidence in Jesus' willingness to welcome the one person everyone else would have driven away. This is really great news for us; we should never feel too unworthy to come to Jesus. In healing the leper, we see Jesus touching the untouchable. Here we see the man who was kept at arm's length by all men wrapped around with pity and the compassion of the love of God.

Then again, what amazing humility we see in this leper as he kneels at the feet of Jesus, he doesn't demand healing; he only says, 'Lord, if you choose, you can make me clean.' It was as if he said, "I know I don't matter; I know that other people will flee from me and will have nothing to do with me; I know that I have no claim on you.

But it is his faith that demands most attention. Somewhere, somehow, he had come to believe that Jesus had power where no one else did. Though leprosy was an incurable disease, this leper believed that Jesus was powerful enough to cure him. His only question: "Is Jesus willing?"

This leper saw Jesus as a man of authority, a man who could make the impossible possible. Not only did he want physical healing, he wanted to become completely clean. He wanted to be restored to fellowship with the community. "Lord, if you are willing, you can make me clean. Lord, if you are willing, you can forgive all of my sins. Lord, if you are willing you can save me and make me whole again."

What is Jesus response to this man's confidence, humility and faith? We are not surprised to read, "I am willing. Be clean!" Can you imagine the gasps which went up from the crowd as Jesus stretched out his hand? Matthew makes it clear that Jesus intentionally touched this man, a man who may not have felt the touch of a human hand for many years. How wonderful that although he could heal with merely a word, Jesus chose to heal this man with a word, and a touch! For Jesus there was only one obligation in life--and that was to help. There was only one law--and that law was love. The obligation of love took precedence over all other rules and laws and regulations.

Like the leper, have you ever found yourself saying these words: "Lord, if you are willing . . ." The scriptures say that the Lord is not willing that anyone should perish, but that all should come to repentance. Jesus spoke: "I am willing. Be clean!" God really wants to cure us and free us from the power of sin and death, we only need to ask!

Then in Capernaum, the centurion approaches. Once again Matthew is speaking of a person hated and feared by his contemporaries. Israel was occupied by the Romans, and these foreigners were not welcome. The centurion is straightforward in his request. He approaches Jesus, much like he would have approached his commanding officer. 'Lord, my servant is lying at home paralysed, in terrible distress.' Notice that He doesn't even have a chance to get out the request when Jesus responds: "I will come and cure him."

God is ready to answer our prayers when we trust in him to do what is best for us. He has an answer prepared even before the words appear on our lips.

Again we see the same characteristics that the leper displayed. We see humility in the centurion's heart in the acceptance of his own unworthiness. He doesn't deserve to have Jesus come into his home. We see confidence in his heart that Jesus has power and authority to grant his request. And finally we see an amazing faith that does not require signs and wonders, but simply the promise or Word of God. Jesus answers the request with a word: 'Go; let it be done for

you according to your faith.' Jesus would say the same thing to you and me today. "Let it be done for you according to your faith" when we have love for others and faith in God.

Are we more like the centurion, or like those who have heard the Word, but have failed to believe? Do we have the kind of confidence in Christ that we can approach him and say: 'Just speak the Word, and it will be done!'

Perhaps the problem is that we have not heard! Paul wrote in Romans 10:17: 'So faith comes from what is heard, and what is heard comes through the word of Christ.' When was the last time you heard from God? Do you seek to hear from Him? Are you asking Him to speak to your heart, to your situation? Are you seeking Him first?

When God speaks, Faith grows! In Jesus' name, Amen.