

Pentecost 2 – Wesley 9am & 10.30am – 29th May 2016

Theme: “Great Faith”

Reading: Luke 7:1-10 ‘The faith of the Roman Centurion’

Text: Jesus said, ‘I tell you, I have not found such great faith even in Israel.’ V 9

Introduction

One of the joys in my many years of ministry, which now number into my 38th year of ordained ministry, is the fact that I have spent a real mixture of time between Parish and community ministry. In community ministry, that is beyond the bounds or confines of a congregation or parish, I have enjoyed working as an industry, sports, hospital/hospice, military, school chaplain as well as my role in Frontier Services where I oversaw the patrol ministers working in many parts of remote Australia. These areas were ministry beyond ‘the church’ to those with no faith or concept of a faith confined to a church building. What a lovely freedom you may well say, as sometimes we are confined in faith by the buildings in which we worship and by the groups of people that we worship with as well. I have found some amazing people of faith outside the confines of what we may call the Christian Church as it meets in worship each week. I have also found lovely people of faith who share regularly in their worshipping congregation. However our account from the Gospel of Luke today is a reminder to the early Christians that they didn’t necessarily have a mortgage on faith but there were those beyond their number who also believed and had faith but in a different way. What a challenge for the early church as well as to us today.

Just maybe the Gospel for us today is a challenge to look beyond ourselves to see where we can be a witness and of service into the wider community and just maybe we will find people of faith there too.

Story

In my first parish I remember looking at the demographics of who were the largest employers within that country community. The mine was the largest followed by the school, hospital and district council. It so happened that one of my elders was the only female employee at the mine, working in the office. How mining has changed! The manager was also nominally Methodist/Uniting Church and was open to me visiting the site once a week on a Friday afternoon. Initially the men were wary, thinking I’d ‘Bible bash them’ or something like that. However, after regularly visiting, it was amazing the opportunities that arose, quite naturally, to occasionally talk about faith issues. There were weddings to be done, the occasional baptism and unfortunately the very occasional tragic death that brought forth further conversations that sometimes turned to faith questions or discussions. Visiting where the men worked, being on their ‘turf’ so to speak, meant that they were much freer to talk to you. These early years of chaplaincy taught me that you need to be out in the community if you are to be effective with your faith beyond the bounds of the church buildings and faith community.

Certainly this account from Luke’s Gospel for today teaches us much about that and challenges us to look beyond our church faith community into the wider community. Let us take a few minutes to look at this story from Luke 7.

Luke 7: 1-10 ‘The faith of the Roman centurion’

The passage begins with the phrase ‘When Jesus had finished saying all this in the hearing of the people....’. The connection here is to the words in Luke 6:46-49 in which Jesus says:

“Why do you call me ‘Lord, Lord’ and do not do what I say?

I will show you what he is like who comes to me and hears my words

and puts them into practice. He is like a man building a house, who dug down deep and laid the foundation on rock. When a flood came, the torrent struck that house but could not shake it, because it was well built.”

Faithfulness is defined as both hearing and doing. Hence here follows an actual story in Luke 7 of a centurion who has heard Jesus and now acts on that. It is one thing to hear, but another to then follow up the hearing with action. A delegation of Jewish elders approaches Jesus on behalf of the centurion acting as a go-between recommending the character of this individual to Jesus so as not to compromise any cultural differences. It is showing respect by the centurion for Jesus and also for the Jewish faith. So Jesus went with them.

However a second delegation is sent by the centurion, this time made up of his friends, as Jesus approaches his house. There were customs and sensibilities that the Roman centurion did not want to offend Jesus with, by Jesus coming into his home. Being a non Jew, the centurion may well have been worried that Jesus would risk ritual pollution by coming into the home of a non Jew, thus alienating him. The centurion was also worried that his military status and Jesus’ religious status, made the centurion feel unworthy of Jesus’ presence. His military status was man made while Jesus’ spiritual status was God given. An incredibly insightful man this Roman centurion who could have simply summoned Jesus’ presence using his own authority. Yet he doesn’t – he perceives that Jesus is ‘of God’ and bows to that authority. Most unusual both then and even now!! The centurion also recognizes that Jesus does not need to be present to heal his servant he only needs to ‘say the word, and my servant will be healed’. Such is the authority and power over and above his own, in the realm of God.

It is in this setting that Jesus says the words:

“I tell you, I have not found such great faith even in Israel.’

After this the friends return to the centurion’s house and find the servant well.

The centurion has understood that the love of God is for ALL people, not a select few. It is for this reason that Jesus commends the centurion’s faith.

Luke notes that when Jesus commends the centurion, he turns to the crowd who had followed him and says these words to them. In doing so he holds up the Roman centurion as an exemplar of faith over and above the people of Israel, including his followers.

An outsider to Israel, is not an outsider to God, nor is even the servant of a hated Roman overlord!!

Challenge for today

This passage reminds us today that we do not have the ultimate right to say we are the people of God – rather that is God’s choice.

Also we are reminded to take our faith beyond the walls of the church into our daily living and share that faith we have been given with others, even those we are not sure whether or not they have any faith at all. God may just surprise you and me!!

Let us pray

Lord Jesus, give us the grace not simply to focus on ourselves, or on the needs and concerns of those within our congregation, but to consider those outside of our church. Help us to care not only about those who are here but also to care for those who are not here. How can we be more welcoming, more open to others? Help us to look at the closed nature of our worship and see ways to be more open. In all things give us faith to see the world, those outside of the church as your cherished people whom you also love. Challenge our faith so we may be your people. Amen.