

EPIPHANY 3

January 27 2019 / D.M. Kerns

II Kings 5:1-15

Romans 12:16-21

Matthew 8:1-13

Standing...

Grace be unto you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

Our focus today is the good news of how sinners and Gentiles
come into the kingdom Jesus brings.

It has always been God's intention—
to call all peoples, all nations, including Gentiles,
including sinners, to Himself.

Let us pray. These are Your words Holy Father. Sanctify us in the truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.

Sitting...

During this, the Epiphany season, we have reflected upon how and rejoiced that
Jesus of Nazareth appeared—(that's what Epiphany means).
How He was made manifest both to Israel and the world.

You recall how Epiphany arrived with a mysterious point of light—a star,
leading those strange characters known as Magi to Jerusalem.
Eventually coming to Bethlehem to worship the little baby Jesus.

On the Sunday following the Epiphany Jesus is baptized in the Jordan, and as you heard
last Sunday, Jesus turns water into wine. Next Sunday you'll hear what only God
Almighty can do, namely calm wind and waves, followed by Jesus being transfigured on
the mountain.

In our Gospel lesson today, Jesus is "Epiphanied" again.

But this time it's by two men,
two men who simply do not count in Israel,
for one is a leper and the other, a Roman Centurion—
a sinner and a Gentile.

This leper, infected with a terrible, ugly skin disease
 was forced to live in pain and isolation.
 You knew a leper when you saw one and you kept your distance.

Leprosy is an object lesson in sin, specifically original sin,
 because it portrays on the outside
 what's true of all by nature on the inside.
 We are all born with ugly,
 rotting,
 diseased souls.

The sores visible on the outside of this man are symbolic of the sores
 we bear on the inside.

Sores like being turned in upon ourselves,
 Sores like chasing after whatever we can get and,
 clinging to whatever we can keep.
 Sores like turning our own reason into divine truth.
 Sores like turning ourselves into our own gods.

What this man was on the outside, you are on the inside—
 diseased from within,
 leaving you not worthy to enter God's presence
 or to dwell with God's people.

My goodness—is there anyone who can help us? Gratefully, there is.

The Someone whom the leper had heard of was One who could heal,
 both inside and out.

His name—Jesus of Nazareth.
 And the Gospel,
 the good report about Jesus had worked faith in the leper's heart.

Thus, when he sees Jesus—he approaches—kneels before Him saying—
 "Lord, if you will, you can make me clean."
 The leper yielded himself entirely to the goodwill of Jesus,
 resting all his hope on Him, waiting expectantly on His Word of healing.

And with a movement to be repulsed by—
 a sight in which everyone who saw it would gasp—
 Jesus touches the putrid leper, a thing forbidden in Israel.

Yet, amazingly, the clean is not made unclean.
 Rather, at the touch of Jesus, the unclean is made clean.
 Beloved, everything Jesus touches—everything He interacts with—
 He changes, for the better.
 John's baptism of repentance, changed to Holy Baptism.
 Jesus touched it and makes it better.
 The Passover, changed to the Sacrament of the Altar.
 Jesus touched it and makes it better.
 Death itself, changed to everlasting life.
 Because Jesus touches it and makes it better.
 When Jesus grabs this man, he makes him better.

And in spite of your sins, He grabs hold of you too...
 touching you by His Word and promise and make you clean,
 forgiven, infinitely better.

With the leper now healed he is told to go back to the community of Israel,
 to see the Priest and offer what Moses commanded.

Jesus then comes into Capernaum,
 where, he's made aware of a Centurion with a sick servant.
 Right away, Jesus says, "I will come and heal him" (Matthew 8:7).

But doesn't Jesus know who this man is?
 For starters, he's certainly not a son of Abraham...
 He's a Gentile, a Gentile who eats bacon, and shrimp.
 More than that, he's an occupying soldier,
 trying to win the hearts and minds of the Jewish people.

He's an officer of the nation controlling and oppressing Israel,
 which means he's an enemy.

Yet, somehow, he's come to believe in the God of Israel,
 doing what he can to befriend the Jewish people.
 We learn from St. Luke that he paid for the synagogue in Capernaum,
 the remains of which you can still see today.
 This Centurion is R and I—rich and influential.
 But when he has a need, he seeks our Lord Jesus.

Sure—he's a big donor...a big giver. And yes, he built the city's synagogue!

He deserves to have his requests answered.
 But this man isn't trying to make any deals with Jesus.
 He's broken.
 Someone precious to him is sick and dying.
 Hospice has been called in. Time is running out.

The Centurion comes as a beggar telling Jesus,
 "I'm not worthy to have You under my roof."
 Which is true in more ways than one.

Jews were taught to never enter a Gentile's home. Never.
 If your foot touches Gentile lands, you shake the dust off your sandals.
 A Jew wouldn't even touch Gentile coinage,
 which is why money changers were in the Temple.

None of this man's Jewish acquaintances had ever come inside his house.
 And do you ever think he was ever invited into the synagogue he paid for?
 Not on your Gentile life.

But there's something more...

The Centurion understands how authority works.

He tells Jesus,

"I am under authority. I have soldiers under me."

"If I tell one to go, he goes."

"If I tell one to come, he comes."

"If I tell my servant to do this, he does it."

Orders—are—orders.

But don't forget—his servant—

his servant doesn't do what the Centurion says.

The servant can't.

What the Centurion has come to realize is

his authority has reached its limits.

However, Jesus' authority has no end.

"Jesus, you don't have to come into my house."

"Just say the word...and my servant will be healed."

You have more authority than I do...

This stuns Jesus.

I imagine the Hallelujah chorus playing in His sinless mind...

Jesus has just found remarkable faith in an unlikely place.

Not in a Jew, but in a Gentile.
 Faith that trusts God hears our prayers and answers them.
 Faith that looks to God for all good and looks to God for mercy in time of
 trouble.

Faith agrees with the Word of God—it clings to it,
 and won't let it go.

Contrast this scene with Naaman the Syrian—spoken about in our OT lesson.

Naaman was a soldier too, who understood authority as well—or did he?
 Because when Elisha did not show up to cure his leprosy,
 but instead sent word by a messenger, Naaman got hot and bothered.
 Naaman thinks there's a proper way to heal someone,
 and by just saying the Word...? That doesn't cut it for him.

To which we want to say, "Naaman, orders are orders!"
 If the man of God says the Word, it's going to happen.

Naaman didn't believe this at first.
 He despised the simplicity of how God delivers the gifts—
 chaffing against it,
 even though he was a soldier and knew how authority works.

Gratefully, for Naaman's sake, once he realizes this, his leprosy is cleansed.

Of the Centurion, Jesus says nowhere in all of Israel—
 nowhere among the chosen people of God has He seen faith like this.
 And with that, Jesus heals the Centurion's servant—by merely speaking the Word.
 The Centurion believes that as soon as he gets back home,
 he'll be greeted with the good news that his servant is healed.
 Not recuperating—not on the mend.
 No need for rehab...
 the Centurion's servant will be completely restored.

I find it wonderful that there are two phrases from this account
 which we use in our liturgical rites.

One of them is spoken quietly by the Pastor,
 at the altar when he receives the Lord's body and blood.

You can't see him, but the traditional prayer before receiving the body of Christ is, "Lord I am not worthy that you should come under my roof, but say the word and my soul shall be healed."

It's an identification with the Centurion—believing Jesus will do exactly what He says.

Second, in the rite of Individual Confession and Absolution, after the penitent confesses his sins and says, "I am sorry for all this and want to do better," the Pastor says, "God be merciful to you and strengthen your faith."

The pastor then asks, "Do you believe my forgiveness is God's forgiveness?"

The penitent says, "Yes."

Then, as his hands are placed upon the penitent's head to speak the absolution, he says, "Let it be done for you as you believe."

That is exactly what Jesus says to the Centurion as He sends him home. Incredible.

After Jesus' death and resurrection, Jesus declares,

"All authority on heaven and earth has been given unto Me..."

How does Jesus exercise this authority?

By means of His pastors who proclaim the forgiveness of sins to you with His promise that not only are the sins forgiven on earth but are indeed forgiven in heaven.

Jesus speaks His same healing Word through the lips of His pastors.

Orders are orders...

Which is why the Pastor's absolution is just as valid and certain, even in heaven, as if Christ our dear Lord dealt with us Himself.

Jesus also authorizes His pastors to wash people in the waters of holy baptism, to set them free now and forever from all their sins, and if you have been baptized you have received this cleansing. Baptism didn't remove the disease of original sin, but it has removed sin's power to condemn you. And when Jesus comes again, you will have that uncleanness removed from your flesh forever.

This is how our Lord Jesus uses His authority.

Did the leper deserve the Lord's healing touch?

The Centurion knew he didn't deserve to have the Lord come under his roof.

And we are no different. We deserve none of the Lord's gifts.

But gratefully, He does not treat us according to what we deserve,
but rather without any merit or worthiness in us,
as pure grace and as pure gift,
He blesses you with forgiveness,
life and salvation.

This is the great Epiphany of our Lord, that He welcomes all into His Body, the Church:
Jew and Gentile, leper and Centurion, those from east and west, even the likes of you
and me.

In the Holy Name of Jesus.

Standing...

And now may the peace of God which passes all understanding, guard your hearts and
minds through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.