Christ and a Centurion
Luke 7:1-10

So, we've made it to chapter 7. This next chapter has a theme running through it. It ends with the story of the sinful woman who comes to Jesus whilst he's at a Pharisee's house, having dinner, and anoints him with oil and washes his feet with her tears and dries them with her hair. But that event ends with those around the dinner table with Jesus asking the question 'who is this?' Who is Jesus? And Luke assembles this chapter to help you answer that question.

To do that he starts off by using this event in the life of this centurion - a man no-one else would have picked as having anything to teach God's people – but who turns out to have something profound to teach us.

God's Surprising Choice
Now to understand some of what's going on here, we need to see this centurion as his Jewish neighbours would have seen him. Firstly, of course, he was a gentile. He wasn't one of them, he was an outsider – outside God's covenant people, the kind of person a Jew wouldn't eat with or visit at home. But he's more than just a gentile – he's also a member of the occupying Roman forces. He's in the army that has trampled over the Promised Land. But it's not as though he's a conscript in that army, doing it because he's made to, he's an officer. So there are a multitude of reasons why the Jewish people would have hated him and resented his presence in their town.

Yet they don't. This man has won their respect, maybe even their affection. They're prepared to act as messengers for him, and not grudgingly. When they go to Jesus, they want Jesus to come and help him. Now, why is that? Why, when the Jews and the Romans could be at each other's throats is there this evident respect, even friendliness between this man and the leaders of the community?

Well, Luke tells us. When the Jewish elders go to Jesus they say, v4-5, 'He is worthy to have you do this for him, for he loves our nation, and he is the one who built us our synagogue.' So, this man who came in as an invader, as an occupier has grown to love the Jewish people. And something has been happening in his heart such that he is prepared to give away his money to help them build a synagogue. He's seen something in this faith of theirs that has moved him to generosity, that he wants to be a part of.

Now where did he get that from? Where did he get this growing love for God and his people from? Because he certainly wouldn't have learnt that in the legionary's Boot Camp. And turning from idols to the one true God was certainly not covered by the Greek philosophers he studied at school. Well, the answer is that God is at work in this man's life, drawing him to Himself, opening his mind up to something more than he has already experienced. This centurion came to Capernaum, most likely just like every other Roman, a worshipper of idols and over the last however many months, God has been at work in his life leading him to truth.

There's a great verse in Acts 17, from when Paul is addressing the philosophers on Mars Hill in Athens, when he says (Acts 17:26-27) God 'made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined

allotted periods and the boundaries of their dwelling place, that they should seek God, in the hope that they might feel their way toward him and find him. Yet he is actually not far from each of us.'

And that's what's going on in this man's life. He's found himself in Capernaum, amongst these Jews, and he is beginning to feel his way toward God, and reach out to Him, and find him. And calling on Jesus to help him is another step along the way.

Now what's that got to do with you? Well, it's this. Some of you – maybe you young guys, or maybe you're not yet a Christian, you're still young in the faith, and you look at yourself and you can't quite believe that you're sat in church on a Sunday morning. And if your friends or family could see you, they'd be thinking 'well, I'd never have imagined you'd end up in church' and you can't quite imagine it yourself, but still you feel this drawing to Jesus. Well, you're in good company, I don't think this centurion could have imagined it either. But that's God at work in your life, organizing your circumstances, determining the boundaries of your dwelling places, Paul said, so you might reach out to Him and find him.

And you might think you don't quite fit the stereotype of the religious geek, and neither did this centurion, but that is God's surprising choice. As Mark said a few weeks ago, it's the motley crew Jesus is forming as his body. So don't turn a blind eye or a deaf ear to his graces, his quiet work in your heart, drawing you, surprisingly, to himself. He's got a track record of doing it.

But this centurion has a servant who is sick, Luke says, to the point of death. And this man cares about this servant, he genuinely cares for him. He has grown to see the value of this man's life and that life is hanging by a thread. So when he heard about Jesus, he asks the elders of the town to go to Jesus, which they do, and in v4 Luke says 'they pleaded with [Jesus] earnestly, saying, "he is worthy to have you do this for him."

Don't believe the spin.

When I was a medical student, I was once driven by the consultant I was working for to a peripheral clinic he was running in a small market town in Suffolk. Now, if you don't know Suffolk, it's a very beautiful, rural county in the east of England. And to get to the clinic he took me on a detour through some of these really picturesque Suffolk villages, and as we drove he pointed out to me all these magnificent old churches, like small cathedrals in tiny villages, completely outsized for the size of the populations, and they're called 'wool churches', because they were built with the money of the wealthy farmers and wool merchants. They wanted to build something 'to the glory of God' or at least that's what gets inscribed on the foundation stone. But looking back you wonder was it more about the farmers' glory and who could build the biggest one, rather than God's, and was this about them trying to buy and build their way into heaven, beautiful as these churches are.

Well, you just don't get that kind of feel here with this centurion. There's no sense he's been building this synagogue to impress anyone, and yet, when the Jewish elders come to Jesus, they stress this man's worthiness: He is worthy to have you do this for him. Jesus, they say, please help him, he really is a good guy, he deserves you doing this for him. He loves our nation, he's built our synagogue and he really cares about this servant.

And these guys aren't just saying that. He really was a good guy, he clearly genuinely cares for this servant, he loves the right things, he gives his money to the right causes, he prays to the right God, and there's no sense this is about show, like those Suffolk Wool churches.

And yet that innocent comment on the part of the elders that 'he is worthy to have you do this for him' opens up a whole can of worms. Because what if they're right? What if God's grace and blessing really does depend on you, and whether or not you are worthy enough? What if his good intervention in your life does depend on you earning enough money so you can build something to his glory? What if salvation were to depend on you getting your life sufficiently ordered so people respect you and are prepared to advocate for you before God?

There are a number of very real dangers in going down that road. Firstly, if that's true, you could never find rest, could you? I mean if your good-standing before God, if his love and mercy toward you were dependent on you doing the right things, and you had to earn this, you couldn't rest, there would be no inner peace, because there would always be more you'd have to do; you'd always be trying to prove yourself – to God, to yourself and to others. And you'd become legalistic – you'd be constantly looking at this or that area, always striving in your own strength, never arriving, and you'd burn yourself and others out in the process. But you'd also become judgmental. Because if you think that our standing before God depends on us, you start looking at how others are doing, and when they don't match up, you condemn them. We've already seen in the sermon on the mount that what comes naturaly to us is to hate our enemies, and go round pointing out the specks of sawdust in others' eyes, completely oblivious to the log in our own. Well, that's natural when you think that people's behavior, what they do, determines God's mercy towards them.

But worst of all, if you think that blessing from God or eternal salvation is based on your worthiness, you end up taking the wrong path. Because the path to salvation as well as to inner peace, is not marked works, or zeal, or effort, it's marked grace. Here's how Paul puts it in Ephesians 2:8-9 'For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast.'

You see it's possible to strive to do all the right things, and to strive to be the right kind of person, but still miss it, because in the end it's not about what you do, it's about God's free gift of grace to you. Because you could never be worthy enough. There aren't enough years to life to make us worthy enough. So thank God it doesn't depend on our worthiness – but it does depends on his. When Jesus died as the perfect man – he had lived the only worthy life and on the cross

he paid the penalty for our unworthiness, that we might receive grace and mercy and forgiveness.

And that is where the Christian faith differs from every other religion. Everyone else is trying to build this ladder to God, trying to be the worthy person their god wants them to be. But the gospel tells us that instead of us trying to climb up, God has climbed down, in Jesus, to live the worthy life we cannot live, and die the unworthy death we all deserve to die, so that we might know God's love and grace and life as a free, unearned gift.

And I think this centurion is beginning to understand that. He doesn't understand it all, but he's getting an inkling of grace, because when Jesus agrees to go with the elders, and when he's not far from the centurion's house, the centurion sends out more messengers – and what he tells them to say is so perceptive. V6: 'Lord, do not trouble yourself, for I am not worthy to have you come under my roof. Therefore I did not presume [I didn't count myself worthy] to come to you. But say the word, and let my servant be healed.'

You see, everyone else is saying 'he's a good guy, he deserves this, he's worthy' and the man himself says 'I am unworthy to even have you come into my house. I don't deserve you to do this for me, but I'm throwing myself upon your mercy. Jesus I don't deserve this, but will you do it anyway?'

And that is humility. He doesn't believe the spin that everyone else is saying about him. He doesn't get taken in by what others say. He knows what he's like on the inside, and so his confidence isn't in himself, he throws his confidence upon Jesus. He's not going to build on a foundation of sand.

Now, I think that for many of us this is really hard, because you are as good as this man. You're successful, people like you, you love God's people, you give generously of your time and money, you genuinely care for others. But don't let your confidence rest in yourself. Instead like this centurion, know, own your unworthiness and rejoice in his grace. You see, we are as bad as the cross says we are, but we are as loved by God as much as the cross says we are.

So don't believe the spin, believe the cross. Jesus doesn't die on the cross because we're so good, or because we have earned this display of his love; he dies on the cross because we could never earn his love, but that is his love for us. So don't be like the man who can't even see he's got a plank of wood in his eye. Don't deceive yourself. Don't listen to the spin. Rather humble yourself like this centurion does, because whilst God opposes the proud, Peter says in 1 Peter 5:5, he gives grace to the humble.

And so through these second messengers, the centurion says to Jesus, v7-8: Therefore I did not presume to come to you. But say the word, and let my servant be healed. For I too am a man set under authority, with soldiers under me: and I say to one, Go, and he goes; and to another come, and he comes; and to my servant, do this and he does it.' And when Jesus hears that Luke tells us 'he marveled at him'.

Recognizing Jesus
This centurion has managed to stun Jesus, and that takes some doing! You've probably heard the expression 'well now, I reckon I've seen everything' nothing would amaze me now! Well, from Jesus' vantage point you'd think that nothing much could amaze him anymore, wouldn't you? – I mean he knows what man is like, he sees through to the real person behind the mask, and yet this centurion amazes him, he marvels at him.

Do you know, there is just one other place where it's recorded that Jesus was amazed. It's in Mark 6:6, when he's in his home town of Nazareth – and Mark says that Jesus 'marveled because of their unbelief'. Now what do these two events, that leave Jesus amazed, have in common? Faith. At Nazareth Jesus is stunned by their *lack* of faith, here he's amazed by this centurion's *measure* of faith.

You see, it's not just humility that this guy demonstrates, like it would be enough to go round thinking or saying 'o, I'm such a miserable sinner, why would God ever bother with me, I'm so wretched, why would he love me.' Because the truth is there's a kind of pride hidden in there. No, it's not humility alone, it's humility and faith. I might be weak, but Jesus is strong, I might be unworthy but Jesus is worthy, I might be unable, but God is able.

And this gentile soldier recognizes something of who Jesus is and he puts his faith in him, he's prepared to trust him. Now, he doesn't understand it all – but you don't have to. Marks' doing his degree in theology, and I'm doing mine and sometimes we're talking about some area of theology, and we're just boggle-eyed at what we don't know. But to come to Jesus with faith, you don't have to understand everything. You don't have to have all your questions answered.

And this man he recognizes two things about Jesus. Two things about Jesus that he puts his trust in. Firstly, he recognizes something of who Jesus is. He realizes that Jesus, like the Centurion himself, is a man under authority. Now notice he doesn't say 'a man of authority.' He says, v8, 'For I too am a man set under authority'. This man knows that the reason his soldiers obey him is because he is under Caesar's authority. So, when he gives an order, it's coming with all the power and authority of Caesar and the Roman Empire behind it. And he sees in Jesus a man who is no ordinary man, he is coming with the authority of God, with the power of the Kingdom of God behind him. Just like he is set under Caesar and when he gives orders things happen, so Jesus has come from God and he just has to give the order, and sickness and death will obey him. That's the first thing he puts his trust in: who Jesus is.

But there's a second thing this centurion recognizes about Jesus. And it's linked to who he is and to his authority, and that is the power of Jesus' word: just say the word, you don't even need to come Jesus, just say the word and my servant will be healed.

Now I can't prove this to you, but I think that this soldier, as he is reaching out to God, taking steps towards him, has been talking with his Jewish neighbours and they've told him about how the Bible opens – with God speaking creation, the universe into being: let there be light, and there was light, and how with just a word God flung galaxies into space. And now he comes with humility to Jesus and he's saying – Jesus, you've done this before, I've heard of the power, I've been told what happens when God speaks the word. Just say the word and this sickness will go.

And that's what amazes Jesus. And he turns to the crowd following him and says in v9, 'I tell you, not even in Israel have I found such faith.'

Well, let me ask you, will he find that faith here this morning? A faith that doesn't trust in its own worthiness, but puts its trust in Jesus. A faith that doesn't pretend to be anything, but throws itself upon the grace and mercy of Jesus. A faith that doesn't pretend to understand everything, but understands enough to trust Jesus and believes in the power of his word. That's the kind of faith Jesus responds to.

And you know what, Jesus doesn't even say another word. Luke ends the story by saying, v10, 'and when those who had been sent returned to the house, they found the servant well'. His power is such that he doesn't even need to speak the word. But in healing this servant Jesus proves the centurion's faith right – he is indeed a man under authority, the one sent from God, whom we can put our faith in. The rock on whom we can build.