

Lent Compline Talks 2017

Faith in and at Work

St Mary's Kidlington

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Military Officers

This week I want us to think about three military officers in the bible and what we can learn from them.

There are many military leaders mentioned in the old testament, which records the long struggle of the Israelites to establish themselves in what was politically a very fluid area, but predominantly controlled by the Philistines who have, of course, got a very bad press in the OT because they worshipped Dagon and Baal, but who modern archaeology shows to have been a very cultured people.

The first military leader I want us to consider is Naaman, the commander of the King of Aram's army, who suffered from leprosy (a disease which can be passed on by close physical contact and is greatly feared. This is because it attacks the nerves, causing people to lose a sense of pain and cause great damage especially to their limbs). We read "On one of their raids, Aram's army brought back as a captive from the land of Israel a little girl, who became a servant of Naaman's wife. She said to her mistress, "If only my master could meet the prophet who lives in Samaria [that was Elisha] he would get rid of the disease for him". Naaman reported this to the King of Aram who decided to write to Ahab, the king of Israel. Ahab immediately thought this was a ruse to pick a quarrel "Am I a god that this fellow sends to me to cure a man of his disease" and he rent his clothes. But Elisha, hearing of this said "Let the man come to me and he will know that there is a prophet in Israel." So Naaman came to Elisha, who did not even bother to come out of his house but sent a servant to Naaman telling him to wash seven times in the Jordan and he would be clean. The response from the high-ranking general was pretty predictable – he felt insulted. "I thought he would at least have come out and invoked the name of his god, and waved his hand over the leprous area; we've got plenty of rivers in Damascus better than any in Israel" – and he departed in a rage. But it was his servants who said to him "If the prophet had told you to do something difficult, would you not do it? But he's told you to do something easy" So Naaman bottled his pride, dipped himself seven times in the Jordan, and was cured. The reading in church often ends there, but the next bit is instructive: Naaman went back and said to Elisha "Now I know that there is no god anywhere except in Israel" (presumably he previously worshipped Rimmon) and he offered a token of gratitude which Elisha refused repeatedly. So Naaman said "I will no longer offer any sacrifice to any god but the Lord" – but being a man who also knew his place he added "Sometimes I have to go to the temple of Rimmon and pray there with my master. For this only let the Lord pardon me."

There are so many lessons in this passage: some of the *dramatis personae* are the highest and mightiest in the land; but however high up or experienced we may feel, it tells us we should never be too proud to take advice. Second, it is a lowly Israelite slave who has the courage to speak about what she knows and it is Naaman's servants who persuade their master not to go off in a rage. This tells us that we should never be afraid to speak truth to those in power. Third, as Elisha felt called to demonstrate the healing power of Yahwe, we are all called to be prophets of the good news of Jesus Christ to those of other faiths. I'm not suggesting that the best way to start is to appear to be rude and antagonise them, but what we learn from Elisha is his total confidence in the power of God.

Let's move on to a centurion in the new testament, as related in Luke Ch 7. The centurion had a much-valued servant who was dying. Not wishing to approach Jesus directly he sent Jewish elders to ask Jesus to come and save the servant's life. As they approached his house the centurion sent a message saying "Don't come into the house, just say the word and I know my servant will be cured. I know what authority means; I have soldiers under me. I say to one "go" and he goes .. and to my servant "do this" and he does it". And Jesus' response to the assembled crowd "Nowhere, even in Israel have I found faith like this". The messengers went back into the house and found the servant in good health. This time the military man is clearly a much more thoughtful person. Though a commander in an occupying force, he was prepared to learn from an itinerant local preacher; we too must continue to learn from the life and actions of Jesus. Presumably the centurion had heard much about Jesus' power to heal without waving his hands over the sick person and invoking the name of God (for example, the healing of the daughter of Jairus the president of the synagogue). Though we still have laying on of hands and prayers for the sick, we mustn't fall into the trap of thinking that it is those actions that matter – it is the power of God to heal that is the important thing. The ceremonial actions are just that; both for the sick person, to concentrate their mind on God's healing power, and for those who are trying to help the sick person feel that healing power.

The final military man I want us to consider is the centurion who commanded the crucifixion party that dealt with Jesus and the two thieves. Crucifixion was a standard penalty administered by the Romans, and this was no one-off event. It was a Roman punishment to terrorize and dissuade those who watched from committing the same offences. There were obviously a lot of bystanders, some of whom came to taunt those being crucified. Public executions such as beheadings are used in some countries for a similar purpose today, and have been throughout the ages. Beheadings are fast; crucifixion was intended to be particularly slow and painful – literally ex-cruciating. So, this would have been routine for this centurion, and certainly the soldiers under him took little notice; they were busy gambling for Christ's garments. So, what was it that made the centurion exclaim either "Beyond all doubt this man was innocent (Luke)" or (Matthew & Mark) "Truly this man was a son of God" when Jesus expired. We can't know what was in the centurion's mind, but if he – who would have seen only how Jesus conducted himself at Pilate's trial and at the crucifixion – can proclaim publicly "This man is God's son" how much more should we – who have the opportunity of a lifetime of thinking about Christ's whole message as recorded, preached, discussed, and experienced in our own lives – be ready to proclaim "Truly, Jesus is God's son" to all those with ears to hear.