

### Sermon for Epiphany 3

The sermon is on the Gospel reading appointed for this day, from St. Matthew 8:1–13.

Grace, mercy and peace to you from God our Father, and from Jesus Christ, His Son, our Savior. Amen.

In the Collect, the Church confesses her reliance upon the mercy of the Lord to provide for us day by day in our needs in the midst of this life, calling upon our almighty and everlasting God to “mercifully look upon our infirmities, and in all our dangers and necessities stretch forth the right hand of Thy majesty to help and defend us...” Thus we continue to see the manifestation of the Christ in the Gospel appointed for this day. The Lord was raised in the midst of family life, and blessed the bond of marriage; now we behold Him in our ongoing necessities, watching over the faithful, and providing that which they need.

First, we behold the faithful leper. We know of several instances wherein the Lord granted healing to this class of outcasts. The leper had lost all standing in society on account of his disease, and ritual uncleanness. This leper, beholding by faith who Jesus is, “*came and worshiped Him, saying, ‘Lord, if You are willing, You can make me clean.’*” The leper offered his prayer in the same way in which we heard St. Mary in last Sunday’s Gospel. At the wedding feast at Cana, Mary’s prayer was simply, “They have no wine.” She trusted that her Son, who is also the almighty and everlasting Son of God, would understand her petition and answer it.

Now we hear the leper: “*Lord, if You are willing, You can make me clean.*” The prayer is simply an observation of the almighty power of God Incarnate, whom he worshiped. It is manifest what he desired of the Lord, but in faith he trusted that the Lord would hear, and hearing, answer this prayer in a manner which glorified God. The Lord Jesus spoke His will, and it came to pass—“*I am willing; be cleansed.*” He accompanied this word with His touch; though the man is ritually unclean, the Lord not only allowed such a one to draw near to Him, but He touched that unclean man, taking away the affliction which burdened his body and divided him from his fellow men. The testimony is still given of fulfilling that which Moses commanded—but by faith, the man is already at peace with God.

Second, we behold the faithful centurion, who implored the Lord’s mercy not for himself, but for another: his servant. A servant, we must remember, is not a man serving for wages; the one on whose behalf the centurion addresses the Lord is the centurion’s slave. This servant had become a paralytic, and was “*dreadfully tormented.*” We know nothing about the circumstances of his affliction; thus they are not relevant for us to understand what the Lord wills for this man. What we are told was that the servant was faithful to his master, for the centurion describes him as a model of obedience.

The centurion understood that Jesus is the almighty and everlasting God, for he confessed that Jesus has but to speak a word and all of creation will obey. In fact, the centurion offered his own authority as a comparison from the lesser to the greater, to testify to his faith concerning the saving power of the word of the Lord. “*For I also am a man under authority, having soldiers under me. And I say to this one, ‘Go,’ and he goes; and to another, ‘Come,’ and he comes; and to my servant, ‘Do this,’ and he does it.*” It is enough for the one having authority to express his will; the mark of those who are rightly ordered under the one



having authority is that they fulfill the word which is given to them. For the man who has such authority, it is enough to express his will and therefore see it fulfilled. Thus if Jesus simply expresses that it is His will that the servant to get better, it will be accomplished.

This is an expression of profound faith; thus Jesus *“marveled, and said to those who followed, ‘Assuredly, I say to you, I have not found such great faith, not even in Israel.’”* Such faith is a surrender to the will of God in all circumstances, and which simultaneously calls upon the Lord to aid the needs of others. Jesus, who knows the hearts of all men, knew the heart of that centurion—knew his faith, and the motivation for his prayer.

The centurion knew he was unworthy of any blessing from the Lord; *“Lord, I am not worthy that You should come under my roof. But only speak a word, and my servant will be healed.”* What a contrast to so many people in every generation, who imagine themselves worthy, and who give no thought to their fellow men, except in so far as their own interests are at stake.

The centurion and the leper knew the Lord for Who He is. He is the One who declares in Jeremiah 33: *“Then it shall be to Me a name of joy, a praise, and an honor before all nations of the earth, who shall hear all the good that I do to them; they shall fear and tremble for all the goodness and all the prosperity that I provide for it.”* The centurion and the leper knew that Jesus is the One who, according to His divine nature, called all things into being, and who sustains and blesses all of creation even now. Jesus directly intervened in their immediate circumstances, but every day of health, every morsel of food, every sip of water, every blessing of body and soul—above all, the gift of the Word by which they received the good news of God’s love and salvation—all these things are blessings from this One whom they came to in prayer. And it is before His altar that we now bring our petitions.

Through the regular ordering of this world, the Lord provides for us; He orders men in their various vocations so that He would make use of them to provide such blessings to our whole fallen race. He sends centurions—and other instruments of State—to work worldly peace and execute justice. He sends His servants, the ministers of the Word, to proclaim His Word and administer His holy Sacraments. It is fitting, on this Festival day of St. Titus, to remember that the reason which St. Paul had left him in Crete was that he *“should set in order the things that are lacking”*—the divinely-established order in the Church necessitated that pastors, bishops be called to the ministry of Word and Sacrament. Much that St. Paul gave as instruction to St. Titus is concerned with order in the Church.

Indeed, the Lord provides other worldly vocations to provide daily bread and all the necessities of life. In all of these callings, these vocations, in life, we serve God as we serve our neighbor—and especially as we serve our brethren in Christ Jesus.

The faith of we who are members of the body of Christ is to be after the model of that centurion. Consider St. Paul’s words to the Romans in today’s Epistle: *“Be of the same mind toward one another.”* It is fitting that these words overlap from last Sunday’s Epistle, for we are in great need of hearing them. The state of the heart of fallen men is to be wise in our own opinions, and to think little of the needs and concerns of others. But Paul goes further, teaching us of our burden for all men: *“Repay no one evil for evil. Have regard for good things in the sight of all men. If it is possible, as much as depends on you, live peaceably with all men. Beloved, do not avenge yourselves, but rather give place to wrath; for it is written, ‘Vengeance is Mine, I will*



*repay, says the Lord.*” We might imagine the centurion to be motivated simply by the desire to see his servant healed, for self-serving purposes. But the Lord behold the faith which motivates the prayer of this man. It is not greed, but responsibility, which drives him, together with the faith which trusts in the power of the Lord.

In this world, the ‘centurions’ are often the Lord’s instruments of worldly justice, and upon Christian parents there is the responsibility for order within the home. So, too, the Lord grants the keys to pastors to exercise discipline within the Church, binding the sins of the impenitent, even unto excommunication, and loosing the sins of those who repent. But God’s Word assures us that malefactors who escape the due reward of their sins in this world will not escape the divine bar of justice. It is a great tragedy for the world, and Christ’s Church, when we who have been washed with the blood of the Lamb would find it so hard, *“as much as depends on”* us to *“live peaceably with all men.”* In the Christian home, tensions between husbands and wife, parents and children, and between Christian neighbors all bespeak an unwillingness to forego wrath, and a desire to settle the scales on one’s own. Brothers and sisters in Christ Jesus, this should not be. *“Therefore, ‘if your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him a drink; for in so doing you will heap coals of fire on his head.’ Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.”*

Of ourselves, we have made a miserable failure of so living before the Triune God, and toward one another. Thanks be to the Lord that we behold the Christ manifesting such love and faithfulness as He accomplished our redemption. No one deserves the mercy of God, but as the Lord so willed toward the leper and the centurion, so His mercy is bestowed upon us, as well. Jesus did not just heal the bodies of the afflicted; He came to offer up His life unto death so that they—and we—would have the hope of eternal life. In Jesus’ death and resurrection we see a fulfillment: *“I will cleanse them from all their iniquity by which they have sinned against Me, and I will pardon all their iniquities by which they have sinned and by which they have transgressed against Me.”*

The atonement—that center of all the history of this world—comes when Jesus offered up His life as the atoning sacrifice for sin upon the cross. And now that good news is brought to us, distributed to us, through the gifts of God in Word and Sacrament which He freely bestows upon us, so that we would believe and be saved. The love of one another which was impossible for the fallen nature, this becomes of fruit of that which Christ Jesus is accomplishing within us. Jesus, risen from the grave and ascended to the right hand of the Father, intercedes for us, and is our everliving hope. Those words which Jesus spoke to the centurion—*“Go your way; and as you have believed, so let it be done for you”*—bring us comfort and peace. By the grace of God, through faith in Christ Jesus, we have this living hope in us: that the Christ who died and rose again is our Savior. In Jesus’ we have peace with the Holy Trinity, and are thus at peace with all His Church. Not according to our works, but according to Jesus’ works, we have life and salvation. The One who healed the leper and the centurion’s servant, is the One who heals us, granting us eternal life, and healing our hurts which would divide us. Thus we are at peace with God, and have our peace with one another. Amen.