

Authority to heal

Sunday 11 October 2009

Ray Hawkins

Readings:

James 5: 13 – 18

Luke 7: 1 – 10

Sermon

From about 60BC the Jewish people were very much under the control of the Romans. There was no love lost between the occupying Roman troops and the Jews.

The Romans hated the Jews seeing a posting to Israel as not an exciting tour of duty. In return the Jews hated the Romans who after all were an army of occupation.

And yet in our gospel reading there are some unexpected happenings:

We have a Roman centurion concerned about a servant, so concerned that he sent Jewish elders to seek Jesus' help.

We have the Jewish elders not only going to Jesus on behalf of the centurion but actually commending him to Jesus.

So this raises the questions:

- Why would a Roman centurion be concerned about a mere slave after all he could so easily get another or as many as he wanted?
- Why use the Jewish elders as a go between, and
- Why would they actually take on such a task?

Here we have a Roman centurion a man of power and authority so much so that he could easily have ordered his soldiers to fetch Jesus but instead he chose to ask the Jewish leaders to go on his behalf.

There was clearly something different about this soldier and the relationship he had both with his servants and the local people. He had certainly heard about Jesus and his healing powers and he had confidence that Jesus could heal his servant.

Despite his status the centurion did not feel worthy of Jesus entering his home but he had such confidence, such faith, in Jesus' healing powers that he was able to say: *'But say the word, and my servant will be healed.'*

Jesus not only recognised the man's faith but was impressed with how great that faith was (*"I tell you, I have not found such great faith even in Israel."*) and the centurion's daughter was healed.

In this story there is no mention of prayer ... just faith. But in the reading from James we see James exhorting his readers to pray. Prayers that may be for widely different things:

'Is any one of you in trouble? He should pray. Is any one of you sick? He should call the elders of the church to pray over him confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed.'

James emphasises that no matter what situation we find ourselves in – be it suffering, joy, physically ill or because we realise that we have sinned – the proper response is to look to God in prayer whether to petition or to praise God.

But there is a danger in this passage that we misunderstand what James is saying about prayer:

*'And the prayer offered in faith **will** make the sick person **well**; the Lord will raise him up. pray for each other so that you **may be healed** The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and **effective**.'*

James seems to be saying that if we pray in faith God will do what we ask! But we know from scripture that this is not always true e.g.

- In 2 Samuel 12: 16 – 18 we read:

'David pleaded with God for the child. He fasted and went into his house and spent the nights lying on the ground. On the seventh day the child died.'

- In 2 Corinthians 12: 7 – 9 Paul writes:

'To keep me from becoming conceited because of these surpassingly great revelations, there was given me a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me. Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me. But he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness."

And we also know from our own experiences that our prayers are not always answered – well at least not in the way we expect.

Relying on prayer for healing is very much in the news at the present time. On Wednesday this week a Wisconsin judge pronounced sentence on the parents of an 11 year old girl following her death last year from an undiagnosed but treatable form of diabetes.

In The Guardian report on the case it said:

'Prosecutors claimed that the Neumanns recklessly killed their youngest of four children by ignoring obvious symptoms of severe illness as she became too weak to speak, eat, drink or walk. They said the couple had a legal duty to take their daughter to a doctor but relied totally on prayer for healing.

"They allowed Kara to die because they got themselves too caught up in the misguided belief that they were being tested by God," the prosecutor said.

The girl, known as Kara, died on the floor of the family's rural Weston home as people surrounded her and prayed. Someone called the emergency dispatcher only after she stopped breathing.'

The parents have not expressed any regret about the death of their daughter and they still trust in the Lord. The father said "I am guilty of trusting my Lord's wisdom completely ... Guilty of asking for heavenly intervention. Guilty of following Jesus Christ when the whole world does not understand. Guilty of obeying my God."

"We live by faith," he said after the sentencing. "We are completely content with what the Lord has allowed to come down, but he is not done yet."

We are told the parents are not religious zealots and in one respect you have to admire the faith they have in God – faith on a par with that of the Roman centurion faith that Jesus praised so highly. But on the other hand it seems incomprehensible that they didn't seek medical help - did they misinterpret their authority to heal?

God can and does still perform miracles I remember some years ago when Lydia's husband was diagnosed with a brain tumour the church prayed for his healing, we laid hands on him and Reg Bartle anointed him with oil – when Brian next visited the hospital the consultant could not understand what had happened to the tumour! Brian took great delight in telling him what had happened!

So knowing that God does perform miracles can make it difficult for us to balance our faith in prayer and in God with the need to seek or accept help from other sources.

But in sentencing the parents in Wisconsin the judge wisely told the parents: "God probably works through other people, some of them doctors."

Nick Fawcett summarised this dilemma in these words:

'Sometimes we need to recognise that we need help. So it was with the Roman centurion who asked Jesus to heal his slave. He was a man in authority, used to giving orders, accustomed to getting things done, but this time he recognised the need for a higher authority, someone who could do what he couldn't.

There are times when we need to do the same. We should not underestimate the gifts that God has given, for there may often be times when the answer to our prayers lies in our own hands, dependent on us using those gifts as God directs. At other times, though, we need to recognise our impotence, and throw ourselves entirely upon the power of God. We need to pray for his guidance in getting the balance right.'

The apparent conflict about prayer in James' letter disappears if we pray in faith with confidence and expectancy - but at the same time accepting that ultimately the answers to all our prayers rests with God's will and grace.

Why some prayers are answered and others not is one of those mysteries that we will never properly understand until we achieve eternal life. In the meantime we must accept that our prayers are not always answered in the way we expect.

But what has all this to do with authority to heal? When Jesus sent out his disciples he gave them authority *'to heal every disease and sickness'*. (Matthew 10: 1) and in his great commission (Matthew 28: 19) he said:

' Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit..... '

We are his disciples following in the footsteps of Jesus' original disciples and have the same authority to heal. But we need to realise that healing is not just about healing of sickness or disease – yes it's about mind, body and spirit but it's also about relationships:

- Our relationship with God
- Our family, including our church family
- Our friends, neighbours, work colleagues.

If our relationships are not right then we can't be right with God and we are not true disciples of Jesus. Maybe, just maybe, that is why God doesn't always answer our prayers; he is waiting for us to put our relationships right.

We will get things wrong at times but it is through the grace of God that we have Jesus to turn to, to call on the authority given to him to set things right – first with God then with others.

We need the level of understanding of Jesus' power and authority to heal as exhibited by that Roman centurion. The NIV Bible Commentary expresses this succinctly in the following words:

'Soldiers respond to and obey orders from their commanding officers. Otherwise, the military would collapse in chaos and never be able to defend itself against another army. Any good military person, like this centurion, understands this implicitly. That is probably why the centurion was able to grasp so profoundly the authority that Jesus possessed over even diseases. When you read God's commands in the Bible, or sense his leading in prayer, do you respond as automatically as a soldier under someone else's authority? Do you carry out the Lord's instructions as faithfully and unquestioningly as this centurion? Do you regard yourself as a person under God's authority?'

That's quite a challenge. I was trained as a scientist where you are taught to question things and not to accept things just at face value. That is essential for scientists - just as essential as it is for us, as Christians, to accept God's authority over our lives and the authority he has given us which includes the authority to heal. But the authority given to us is not to be used to lord it over people it is to be used to help others for the glory of God.