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FROM THE RURAL PULPIT

Such Faith

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Drawing on Luke 7: 1-10 (The Centurion's Slave), the sermon reflects on the complexity of faith and the relationships inspired by faith within the distinctive sacred space of cathedral and church buildings. There is a call for the faith of the 'hidden congregation' to be respected and for the faith of ministers and 'gathered congregations' to be challenged. *Such Faith* was preached at the united service of the Bro Tysilio Ministry Area, at St Mary's Church, Pentraeth, in the last weekend of May 2016.

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This narrative from Luke's Gospel is probably familiar to many of us; perhaps so familiar that its poignant depths are in danger of becoming less sharp with each retelling.

Here, we have a Centurion stationed at Capernaum in Galilee. He is a Roman soldier, officer, citizen, occupier, Gentile; he is many difficult things in this place, at this time. We never get to see this Centurion directly because he is always 'out of view'. Although he is always 'out of view', he is also fully present in another sense because this story is about *him* – about his particular relationship with Jesus, and about Jesus' particular relationship with him.

We are told that the Centurion has a slave who means a great deal to him, and this slave is ill, at the point of death. The Centurion, who has authority and power in his own world, recognises that, in this matter, he is powerless to help his slave. So, from the depths of his needs, he turns away from his own familiar world and invokes the authority and power of another. His real confidence in the authority and power to which he turns is contrasted starkly with the complete absence of confidence about *who* he feels he is in relation to it.

Throughout all of this, we can sense acutely that the Centurion is highly aware of his 'outsider' status, his lack of right, his lack of deservedness, to the kind of access that he is requesting. We see this in the way that the Centurion sends a delegation of Jewish elders to make the request on his behalf. We see this also when Jesus makes his way to the Centurion's house, only to be stopped by the Centurion's friends. This is all because the Centurion is adamant that he is an 'outsider' and it is inappropriate for Jesus to meet with him in that direct way.

Instead, the Centurion gives Jesus a statement of his faith, just as it is, at that moment in time, by saying:

I recognise your authority in this area;

only speak the word and my servant will be healed.

You need come no further.

And, it is this that evokes Jesus' amazed response: "I tell you," Jesus says, "not even in Israel have I found such faith." *Not even in Israel have I found such faith.*

In response to *such faith*, the Centurion's servant is healed.

What is *such faith*? What is so special about *such faith* that it causes Jesus to commend it so highly? What significance does any of this hold for us? When I

read this gospel passage, I feel drawn into a story about *such faith* in all its complexity.

Such faith is primarily a faith that intuitively recognises authority outside itself. It is aware of human powerlessness to bring healing and wholeness in ways that really matter.

Such faith is a faith that would hide itself away, if it could, but it can't because some human need is just too great. This is a non-presuming faith of an outsider, intuitively sensing the value of what is being offered, and humbly asking to be granted access. It is a faith that keeps itself largely 'out of view'.

Such faith is a faith that is persistent. It perceives the great religious and social restrictions carefully placed to restrict access, where they do exist but also where they don't exist. But it persists in spite of this.

Such faith is a faith that is ignorant in some ways. It is not concerned with the subtleties of theology, and how these should affect it. This is a faith in the immediate present, raw and connected to basic human needs.

Such faith is a faith that senses and reveals something essential, something that those who should know better find difficult to grasp. God's reaching out to heal, to make whole, is never restricted by human boundaries or human limited vision. It always reaches out only to where we are. It does not wait for us to be where we are not.

So, is this "such faith"? "Such faith" that Jesus found not even in Israel? When I read this Gospel passage, I cannot help but make connections with what I see happening in the many cathedrals and churches around Wales and England. So many people, from so many different backgrounds, pass through these sacred

buildings, deliberately outside the service times for the gathered communities, the congregations.

They are largely invisible to us, but signs of their presence are there to see if we want to. We know that they have been there because of the thousands of prayer requests left for us to pray on their behalf or the thousands of burnt-out votive candles, which have held their prayers, or most exposed of all, the pilgrim services for healing and wholeness, briefly attended before they disappear again to another place. Then, there are also those who leave no signs at all, those who just come and sit.

It is because of what I see that I am always puzzled when people say, “no one comes to ‘church’ anymore”. They do come, given a chance, if we offer access, of a kind that they can accept. Yet they remain largely invisible to us because they are not part of our congregational life. We often don’t see them come into view before they have already gone out of view. Maybe what is really being said is that people are not coming to church in the way that we want them to, that is, in the way that we discern as ‘counting’.

In spite of our blindness, our cathedrals and churches contain within their walls so many stories about individuals who cross significant thresholds just to be there. All we need to do is help enable access, and not get in the way of God’s reaching out. We need to trust God to do what we preach God does.

I wonder where these people would go, if they could not come to our sacred spaces steeped in an authority which visually draws them, an authority that comes from centuries of prayer and tradition, an authority that promises the kind of healing and wholeness that the world cannot provide?

There needs to be space for *such faith*, and *such faith* needs to test our faith; our faith in a God who is always ready to meet people, again and again, right where they are, whether we can see it or not.

Notes on contributor

The Revd Dr Tania ap Siôn is a curate in the Church in Wales Ministry Area of Bro Tysilio on Anglesey. In addition, as an academic concerned with the social significance of religion and research-based reflective practice at the University of Warwick, she has published widely on prayer and sacred space.

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