

Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost (10/18/2020)

Parents will know the horror of the prospect of something happening to your child. In Jesus' time, the normal emotional consequences were heightened for most because there were no long-term care facilities, no Medicare, no Social Security. Children were your retirement, and the vehicle through which the family dynasty continues. This was even more relevant for the ruler in the Gospel.

Who was this ruler - we don't know - so many other times the Scripture will remark about a person's position (a Roman Centurion), or their nationality (a leader of the Jews, a Samaritan) - but on this point it is silent - just a vague "some" ruler. Jesus apparently does not consider the nationality of the individual, does not focus on their status (as we know Jesus is as willing to help a poor widow as he is a ruler or Roman officer), he simply issues the command for the healing. This should also be our stance when approached for help - to see not the person and their status or condition, but to see the situation and to minister in the name of our Lord as we would have done to us.

But there is something more going on in this story than this simple lesson. Just after the ruler comes to Jesus to plead his request, Jesus laments of people who will not believe without a sign. Yet, when the man pleads again Our Lord's heart is moved with pity and he cures the son thus also providing the sign. He wishes all of us to move to full belief not because of our seeing signs, not because of sensible experiences - he wants us to believe in him in faith. This ruler in the story was in a similar position as we are now. He had heard the stories of Jesus' wonders from others (as we have), he believed on some level in the truth of these (since he came to ask for the healing). What Jesus laments is that this was not enough for him. Unless it had been done for him, the man was not fully believing, and his house had not yet converted. The Apostle St. Thomas comes to mind. Thomas does not simply take his friends at their word, he does not simply remember the many wonders that he had seen with his own eyes done for someone else, he does not trust the words of Jesus who said that he would raise from the dead. He, like this man, is only brought to full faith and conversion because of a personal miraculous experience.

How often are we like that? Having been told the stories of the wondrous power of Jesus, after having heard of his promises and the revelation that has been passed down and guarded by

the Church, we can lack full faith. We seek signs, and pay much attention to them. This is partly a thing that is human nature and has always been the case, but it has been amplified in our current Naturalistic, Secular society that prizes sensible data as the only criterion of truth. God is a present reality, not because our seven senses or scientific instruments can track him.

Determining the presence of God using our senses is like trying to get the wind speed from a thermometer - God's presence or absence cannot be discerned this way. Neither are our emotions a good gauge, as these fluctuate for a variety of reasons, and will prove one thing one time and another the next. Jesus correctly read the ruler's heart when he said *Unless you see signs and wonders, you will not believe*. This is so clear when in a final act of needing a sign, he must check to see the time of the boy's healing so he can match it to the exact time he was with Jesus. Such a painstaking review of the sensible data - yet that was not what Jesus was looking for and why he was reluctant to give the sign.

Signs of God's presence sometimes come, or are sometimes withheld by God in his wisdom. Our faith cannot depend on them. In another rough time, what sign was this man going to need before trusting in Jesus again, and, on the other side, what signs from a false god will draw him away from faith in Jesus. Dependence on signs, and altering faith due to them, is a risky business. It is faith in the heart independent of signs that is more solid for the believer. We have been given all the empirical proof we need in the words of scripture and the faith that has been passed down to us. We can take this "hard data" as all that is needed and not demand a unique and personal sign for ourselves. The Church has taken the scriptural revelation and combined it with the Tradition inspired by the Holy Spirit to help to clarify and pass on the deposit of faith. The fact that Jesus the things he did, and the amazing clarity of the deposit of faith we have - this should be enough for us to simply suspend our need for a personal sign ... and just believe.

This is the belief that allows us to more peacefully accept the situations of life knowing that God is there despite it not "feeling" that way all the time, it is the belief that draws us to act as Jesus did and spread the Gospel and serve others no matter their nationality or status, and it is this faith that draws us to the altar of God to receive the Body and Blood of Jesus, the presence of which we cannot discern with our bodily senses. This is the faith, that through the sacraments Jesus left us, brings healing and salvation.