

Sermon for the Second Sunday after Pentecost

"I too am a man set under authority..."

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Where there is no authority, one finds many words. One cannot command, so he has to talk, dialogue, argue, convince, build consensus. In a Democracy, no one person is above or below another, and so everyone must convince his neighbor why he is right, and everyone else wrong, through seemingly endless discourse.

Today's gospel reading centers around a certain centurion, a soldier, himself with authority over a hundred men, but himself under the 'imperium,' the unquestionable authority, of the Roman emperor. Where there is such authority, such power, words become very few, for one in authority no longer needs to argue, convince, or compromise. He speaks, and it is done. 'Charge.' 'Invade.' 'Take no prisoners.' 'Off with his head.'

Our centurion represents the unflinching authority of what was at his time the most powerful person on earth; the Caesar; a man who commanded hundreds of legions, endless armies, who's possessions spanned across all the known continents of the earth, who dominated countless nations speaking any number of strange languages. This Caesar, under who's authority the centurion served, was, the only authority in his time, for whatever he said, it was so. When Caesar moves, when Caesar speaks, things happen.

The centurion represents the power of great men. In our own day, we no longer have Caesars, but we are not lacking in powerful men, commanding men with authority. One thinks of our presidents, our Supreme Court

Justices, or perhaps, our Wall Street Bankers and Successful Billionaires. They likewise use few words, for they have great authority. 'Vetoed.' 'Constitutional.' 'Unconstitutional.' 'Buy.' 'Sell.' 'You're fired.' These great and mighty men of our time: when they move, when they speak, things happen.

The Caesars were worshiped as gods, so great was the power they seemed to possess. And we too have our gods whom we revere, or at least fear.

Even today we think of our elites, our rich, our 'one-percent,' as possessing a limitless power which controls every aspect of our lives. This leads some to develop conspiracy theories about just how deep the absolute dominion of some group goes. To others, it brings them to a despair, thinking they have no freedom in life, that they are merely a pawn manipulated by various systems of power. To still others, it becomes their hope; they imagine the strength of the state, the elite, unlimited, and so it is able, if properly managed, to heal every ailment of life.

But the centurion knew better than this, for he understood that when it came to everything of true gravity in life, everything which truly matters, the authority of Caesar, the might of the powerful, immediately comes to an end.

"Now a centurion had a servant who was sick and at the point of death." What political power will save you when you are sick, even unto death? When the doctor pronounces upon your cancer, upon your dementia, 'terminal'? When you are faced against a wall with a gun to your head. What Caesar can deliver you?

Temporal authority is only that, and when one turns to face eternity, such power, such authority, fades to nothing before the boundless breadth of the infinity to come. It is utterly powerless, and the pomp and might of the great men of this age, of the violent and the rich, become indistinguishable from children playing soldier or Monopoly.

The centurion says: *"I too am a man set under authority, with soldiers under me: and I say to one, 'Go,' and he goes; and to another, 'Come,' and he comes; and to my servant, 'Do this,' and he does it."* For the centurion understands the authority he

represents, to say 'come' to one and 'go' to another; but more importantly, he knows when that authority has reached its end.

So it is written: *'I*

too am a man set under authority.' For do you see the centurion's confession? It is as if he is saying, 'Yes, Lord, I am under the authority of Caesar, and Caesar's authority is that which I represent, I say go and come, and it is done; but who will say 'die' and 'live,' and it is done? You, Lord, are one under authority, for you are under the authority of the most high God, he who made the heavens and the earth and moves all things in creation by the power of his Word; you are under His authority, and it is His authority, to kill, and to make alive, which you exercise.' *'Therefore, say the word, and let my servant be healed.'*

'When Jesus heard

these things, he marveled at him, and turning to the crowd that followed him, said, "I tell you, not even in Israel have I found such faith." And when those who had been sent returned to the house, they found the servant well.'

Now we see that above the empire, there is a greater empire; above all earthly authorities, there is a heavenly authority. And this authority is not decked in the splendors and luxuries of this world, neither in a ruler's purple or in Prada; but rather its infinite power is clothed in humility and human weakness, even as it is written: *that he 'being in the form of God, thought it not robbery to be equal to God, but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant.'* So authority over *'over all things in heaven and on earth and under the earth,'* over death, and life, and eternal salvation, have been given to the Suffering Servant, Our Lord Christ, the ever-blessed.

And He, being a man of authority, also speaks to us in few words. He does not argue; he does not convince. He says *'thy sins have been forgiven,'* and it is so. He says *'depart thou unclean spirit,'* and it is so. He says *'enter into the joy of thy master,'* and it shall be done. For when Our Lord moves, when Our Lord speaks, things happen.

What of the day, then, of your death? When you stand at the brink of infinity. Do not be afraid; do not be surprised; you too are as a man under authority; and Your Lord Jesus, perhaps to honor the faith of that ancient centurion, will say to you, as you breath your last, 'Go,' and you will go. And on the day of Resurrection, he will say 'Come,' and you will come.

And before the gate of heaven, a mortal creature before the immortal; a powerless man before the almighty God; a corrupt, sinful person before the divine holiness, you will be ashamed. *'O Lord, I am not worthy to come under thy roof; but only say the word, and your servant will be healed.'*

And, as a *one who speaks with authority*, your Shepherd will say few words:

"I will. Be healed."

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*Preached by Pastor
Fields*

*Sermon Texts: 1 Kings
8:22-24, 27-29, 41-43; Galatians 1:1-12; Luke 7:1-10.*