

JESUS AND THE TOUGH GUY

Luke 7v1-10

In the west it is hard to get men to take notice of the Gospel. The popular caricature has been that such things are for women and children. Most men seem out of reach of the gospel, even unapproachable. Well, this morning we will see a man's-man coming to terms with Jesus. But first I want to mention a remarkable group of men who have also encountered Jesus.

You may have heard of the *'Tough Talk'* team; they are a bunch of power lifters, body builders, ex bouncers, debt collectors, ex villains and hard men who go around telling amazing stories of how Jesus has changed their life. The founder is Ian McDowall. He says he began working as a night club bouncer at the age of 18 and by the time he was 24 violence and anger had taken him over and he was getting deeply involved in crime. He was also taking anabolic steroids because his obsession in life was body building; but the drugs were destroying his health. He says his heart was becoming *"cold and as hard as stone"*. Then came his cross roads moment! After a serious fight at a club one night he realised what a mess his life was in and he pleaded with God to change him. At that moment, he says, instead of hatred, his heart was filled with love and he was born again by the power of God's Spirit. An amazing transformation began in his life and in due course he gathered other men who had similar backgrounds and experience of Jesus and formed *'Tough Talk'*. Now he travels widely with the team, often in prisons, sharing his faith and telling others of God's love.

The toughest of men are not out of reach of the gospel. This morning we are looking at just such a man, a centurion. What do we know about centurions? They were Roman officers in charge of a *centuria* – a group of eighty (not 100) men. Senior centurions commanded a cohort, the major Roman fighting unit, made up of 480 men. Ten cohorts made up a Legion and there were thirty legions in the Roman army; three were stationed in Britain. This man evidently commanded a troop of soldiers garrisoned at Capernaum.

Centurions were the backbone of every legion. They were the men who really mattered. Most were promoted through the ranks the hard way and this could take ten to fifteen years. By the time they got to be a centurion they were battle scarred and their chest armour was decorated with gallantry medals. This man wore the famous centurion's helmet with its distinctive sideways horsehair crest instead of the ordinary legionary's back-to-back plume. The historian Polybius lists a centurion's qualities: they must be *"men who can command, steady in action and reliable; they ought not to be over anxious to rush into the fight; but when hard pressed they must be ready to hold their ground and die at their posts."* So much for centurions in general, but what does the text tell us about this man in particular?

v2: Now a centurion had a servant who was sick and at the point of death, who was highly valued by him. This tells us a lot. You can measure the character of a person, a family, a church, a whole society by the way they treat those who are the weakest. Servants in the Roman Empire were the lowest of the low and they had no rights; and the word used in the text here describes the lowest rank of slave, a *doulos*. In the hands of some officials this man would have been thrown on the scrap-heap. That's what happens still today. People are valued when they are useful and disposed of when they outlive their usefulness. This centurion showed what he was made of by the way he cared for his sick servant.

So we have learned one thing already – the toughest of men can have a tender core. Yes, some can be hard and cynical, but get beneath the surface and you will probably find someone or something they really care about. This centurion cared about his servant and it became his point of contact with Jesus. Our new Community Help Hub initiative could reach some men who are desperate about finding a job and are asking: “*Does anybody care?*”

3,4: When the centurion heard about Jesus, news of his exploits had reached the centurion, and now Jesus was in the vicinity, **he sent to him elders of the Jews, asking him to come and heal his servant. And when they came to Jesus, they pleaded with him earnestly, saying, “He is worthy to have you do this for him.”** This is remarkable! Local Jewish leaders speaking well of a Roman centurion! And they were not just passing on a request – they were *interceding* for him. This centurion is full of surprises. He shows compassion for the weak. He treats people around with respect. He takes the trouble to understand their culture and their ways. He has a good name even among those who should resent him. *He is a man of good will*. There are plenty of people like him out there still. They don't know God and they are without the Holy Spirit, but their lives are impressive. The Bible explains how this is. It is because all men and women are made in the image of God; that image has been damaged and distorted - but it has not been obliterated. But, however good, all men and women are still lost and in need of rescuing; this is because the whole of humanity is infected with a deadly disease of the soul called sin.

v4,5: And when they came to Jesus, they pleaded with him earnestly, saying, “He is worthy to have you do this for him, for he loves our nation...” This, again, is astonishing. Jews hated their Roman occupiers and most Roman soldiers despised Jews. Most *loathed* their term of duty in Israel. Rome had found the Jews notoriously difficult to handle. They refused to offer sacrifice to the deified Emperor. There were terrorist groups like the Zealots and uprisings led by wannabe Messiah's. And so policing had to be harsh and any hint of rebellion was crushed with brutality. Yet this centurion had come to *love* Israel. He didn't realize it, but by loving this people he had put himself in a position where God would bless him. (Genesis 12v2f)

“He loves our nation, and he is the one who built us our synagogue.” He had footed the bill for the construction! Centurions were not poor; they were paid at least

ten times basic pay. This man was able to finance the building of a synagogue. All this suggests that the centurion was drawn to the Jewish faith. He could not have been a full proselyte i.e. a gentile convert who was circumcised and accepted the duty of fulfilling the law. More likely he was a “*God fearer*”. His background had led him to believe in many gods but perhaps he had found himself wooed by the God of Israel: One God, the creator of the universe, sovereign over all nations, righteous, full of mercy and yet holy and almighty. As Christians we often meet apathy and indifference - and occasionally, hostility. But there are still plenty who drink in the gospel like thirsty men. Even people we think would never be interested.

Renton Baker is another *Tough Talk* team member. He says that his life spiralled out of control when his father died of cancer and he was drawn into the strange sub culture of football violence. He got involved in fights on the terraces and in the streets and pubs all around the country. He says he decided which match to go to based on where the best punch-up could be found. He led a double life - at home he was a loving husband and father, but in this other world he was “a heartless thug”. Then he met a Christian who had the courage to challenge him and tell him about Jesus and his life was turned around. He is now passionate about sharing the gospel with others. The most surprising people are ripe for the Gospel.

It's important not to judge people by appearances. The *Tough Talk* website has a page where prisoners can tell their stories or give their impressions after a visit from team members. But one entry is from an officer in the Met. telling how he got talking to an intimidating prisoner - 20 stone, 6 foot 3 inch, tattooed and shaven headed. But this tough guy gave him a book that was battered and torn, saying, “*this book changed my life and it could change yours*”.

v6,7: And Jesus went with them. When he was not far from the house, the centurion sent friends, saying to him, “Lord, do not trouble yourself, for I am not worthy to have you come under my roof. Therefore I did not presume to come to you. This explains why the centurion hadn't come himself. It wasn't that he was too high and mighty. Quite the opposite! *The humility of this man is staggering.* The local Jews had made it clear that they could never come to his Gentile home because it would mean being ceremonially defiled. He had accepted this and so he assumed Jesus wouldn't want to visit him either. You will come across this quite often – people who have the wrong idea about Jesus because they have been misled by religious folk. For instance they may have been given the impression that being a Christian is just about keeping rules, about *not* doing this and that! And so they think, “*OK! I know I'm not good enough. I could never live up to that.*” That's what had happened to this man. He said: **I did not presume to come to you.**

v7,8; But say the word, and let my servant be healed. For 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.” As a Centurion, he issued commands every day and his soldiers obeyed

immediately because his words were backed up with authority. If a soldier defied a centurion he was defying Rome itself. So he is saying, *“My commands have power to make things happen because of the authority behind me; how much more will your commands have power!”* This showed great insight. He understood something the religious big-hitters of the day had missed. Jesus was not some wonder worker or freelance prophet. When he spoke he did so with the authority of God.

Don't underestimate the insight people can have when they start to encounter Jesus - even though they have no church background and they haven't read the books you've read. It would seem the issue for this man was not - *could* Jesus heal his servant, but - *would* he? Would Jesus be interested in someone who was not a Jew? Would Jesus turn away from him because he was a Roman soldier – a man associated with violence and bloodshed? But we have seen this before. While you think you're good enough you keep Jesus at arm's length. Those who think they are *not* qualified are *the very ones* who are!

Here's another example from the 'Tough Talk' Team. Simon Pinchbeck describes himself as *a copper who had a career change and became a criminal, then had a life change and became a Christian*. After 23 years in the Met. he left after receiving a “not guilty” verdict on an assault charge. He became obsessed with money and entered into a life of crime. But then he hit rock bottom. He was ripped off for a large amount of money by his new-found colleagues and was left facing prison or violence and death. He was at his lowest and he knew he had messed up big time – but, he says, that was when God *“threw him a lifeline”*. It came in the shape of a *Tough Talk* team member called Bryn Robertson. He saw the change Jesus had brought about in this man, and it made him face up to his need of Jesus. He went on an Alpha and asked Jesus into his life.

Back to our centurion! He wondered if Jesus would have anything to do with him. **v9: When Jesus heard these things, he marvelled at him, and turning to the crowd that followed him, said, “I tell you, not even in Israel have I found such faith.”** This centurion had expressed clearer faith than those who had been tutored in religion all their life. *Faith!* This is what Jesus looks for! Being a good, caring person, respected in the community, open to the truth about God and demonstrating humility is all good. *But Jesus still looks for faith*. Why? Because our very best still falls pitifully short of God's perfect holiness. This is why Jesus came and died on a cross – to reconcile sinners to a Holy God. Jesus is looking for people humble enough to accept that, and to receive him, and put their trust in his righteousness not their own.

Jesus looks for faith. In this instance the centurion had faith for his servant to be healed by Jesus simply speaking the word – without seeing Jesus or hearing his voice or feeling his touch! Come to think about it – that is not unlike our situation today. We can't see Him or hear him or feel his touch. We rely on what we have been told and we believe. It is the basis upon which we pray for the sick still.

Luke doesn't even record any word of command - and the sequel is almost by-the-way! **v10 And when those who had been sent returned to the house, they found the servant well.** What a coincidence! That's what some would say. Some people refuse to believe even when the clearest evidence is staring them in the face. But I suspect it was life changing for others. For instance, was Jairus among the Jewish deputation? He was one of the rulers of the synagogue at Capernaum, after all. Did he hurry back to discover the centurions' servant had made a miraculous recovery? If so then this incident would have been in his mind when his own 12 year old daughter fell sick and was dying – and so, he too, went looking for Jesus.

We don't know what happened to the centurion. There is no further mention of him. But I cannot imagine his life ever being the same. *Even tough guys are not safe when Jesus is around.*

John Wilthew. April 2010