

Sermon for Sunday, May 29, 2016
St James Episcopal Church, St James NY
The Very Rev. Canon Dr. Raewynne J. Whiteley

Today is the second Sunday after Pentecost,
and we're back to what is known in the Episcopal Church as
"ordinary time."

Ordinary time
is, as you might imagine,
the time that isn't marked
by any great feast days or seasons.
From now
until the end of the church year in November,
apart from our patronal feast, the Feast of St James,
and All Saints Sunday,
we'll have green on the altar
and our gospels, which will come from Luke,
will tell us the story
of Jesus' ministry
as he travelled around the countryside
preaching and teaching and healing.

Sometimes the shift from the Easter season
and its focus on Jesus' resurrection
and the Pentecost coming of the Spirit
back to Jesus' earthly life
seems somewhat abrupt.
But this year,
there is a thread of connection.

Because if Pentecost is about
the spread of the gospel to all nations,
here we have the unexpected story
of Jesus' own ministry
to someone outside the Jewish community
and faith.

Perhaps we shouldn't be surprised.
After all,

back when Jesus was born,
it wasn't only the local shepherds
who came to see him;
wise men

 from somewhere in the east
came as well,
traveling long nights
by the light of the star
until they come to the place
where he lay.

And Simeon, that old man
who had waited at the temple, the heart of Judaism,
to see the messiah,
and took the baby in his arms
and declared him a light
 to the gentiles.

But his childhood, as far as we know,
was perfectly ordinary,
growing up
in the town of Nazareth,
and when he began his public ministry
it seems that not only the people
but he himself assumed
that his mission
was first and foremost
to his own people,
the people of Israel,
the people of God.

That's what he said, anyway,
further on in his travels,
when a foreigner asked him
to heal her daughter.

But here today the seems to have forgotten that;
a Roman centurion
begs for help
and his response is immediate.
No protests, no questions;
he just goes with the centurion's messengers
towards his home.

And there is a healing,
and already the gospel
has spread beyond the Jewish people,
a prefiguring
of the day of Pentecost
when the gospel would be made known
to all nations.

But before we look at today's story in more detail,
let me remind you
of where we are in the story.
Luke begins his gospel
with the story of Jesus'
conception and birth;
then jumps forward thirty years
to his baptism
and retreat in the desert.

And when he leaves the desert
he goes back to Galilee,
up in the north
 of the Holy Land,
back where he grew up.
And he begins to preach and teach, traveling from town
to village.
And eventually
he comes to Nazareth, his home town,
and preaches in the synagogue,
and the people
reject him
and drive him out.
That's where we left the story
back at the end of January,
before Lent and Easter intervened.

Thrown out of the town
that he calls home,
Jesus makes his base in Capernaum,
a fishing village
on the shore

of the Sea of Galilee.
You can still visit it,
see the walls and paving of a synagogue
built on top of the remains of the synagogue that Jesus knew;
see the outlines of the rooms of a house
that within fifty years of Jesus' death
had become venerated
as the place where Jesus healed
Simon Peter's
mother-in-law,
and superimposed on those outlines
the octagonal shape
of an early church.

It is Capernaum
that Jesus makes his base,
keeps coming back to
after his journeys out
into the towns and villages
of Galilee.

And it is Capernaum
where Simon Peter's mother-in-law lives,
and where Jesus heals her
even before
he meets her son-in-law,
and there, most likely, that he stands on the shore
and shouts out to a fisherman in his boat,
"follow me!"

Simon Peter is followed by James and John, and then Levi,
and then the other eight,
and by the time he comes back to Capernaum
 after the Sermon on the Mount or on the Plain,
 depending on how you describe the geography,
by the time he comes back to Capernaum,
he has a band of close friends who travel with him,
and has become almost used
to the crowds
who magically appear

every time he sets foot
outside the house.

And so it is nothing unusual
when a group of elders from the synagogue
come to him.

“We have a centurion
stationed here in the village. He’s a wonderful man. He helped pay for the synagogue
renovations.

But his slave is sick, and even though
he is a stranger to our faith,
he wonders
if you would heal him?”

And Jesus turns
and follows them.

But suddenly,
as they approach the house,
some men block their way.

“You don’t need
to come in.

Our friend the centurion
says that he knows he is a stranger,
he knows that he does not belong.

He has no right
to expect anything of you.

But he also knows
what it is to give orders
and be obeyed,
and he knows
that if you say his servant is healed,
it will happen.”

And the men turned
and went into the house,
and found the servant healed.

Even though
Jesus was still outside,
even though
he hadn’t said a word.

And Jesus points out
to the crowds who had followed him
the incredible faith
of that centurion -
one who didn't even belong
to the people of God.

It's interesting, isn't it,
that on this Memorial Day weekend,
we have the story
of a soldier.
A soldier
who understands
the nature of authority.

In the Episcopal Church, we have a Bishop for the Armed Forces.
The current bishop is Jay Magness.
And in anticipation of this memorial day,
he wrote,

“On this day we remember that some of those under authority have, as a consequence of
their service, sacrificed their lives.

Is there a cause for which dying is honorable? Laudable? Since the beginning of my
military service 50 years ago, I have been trying to answer that question. For those who
embrace Godly values, the question about dying in the service of your country has some
important implications. Military training almost always contains the underlying lesson
that being involved in the fulfillment of a mission could end up in death.”

Tomorrow
is the day when we remember those
whose lives were shaped by obedience,
so much so,
that they eventually died
in military service.

As Christians,
we give thanks for them
and pray for peace
so that no more lives
may be lost.

But Memorial Day also provides us for an opportunity to reflect
on what it means for us

to be “Christian soldiers”,
people marked by obedience to God
and service in Christ’s name.

As Bishop Magness continues,
“I believe that people of faith can find spiritual values from the stories of men and
women who have made the “ultimate sacrifice” of their lives.”

As Christians, we are people under authority.
We are people called
to obedient
service.

And that
is something that has pretty much gone out of fashion in American culture outside of the
military,
and not just among the young.
We like to do what we like to do.
We resent people
that impose rules or duties.
To quote that well known song baby Frank Sinatra,
our mantra could be
“I did it my way.”

But that is not
what it means to be a Christian.
In baptism
we promise to obey God.

In the 1928 Book of Common Prayer, and earlier editions, candidates were asked:
Wilt thou then obediently keep God's holy will and commandments, and walk in the same
all the days of thy life?

In our current Book of Common Prayer, it asks
Do you promise to follow and obey him [Jesus Christ] as your Lord?

Each and every one of us here
who has been baptized
has promised to obey God.

And as your priest, I have promised to obey not only God, but also my bishop.
And it's something I take very seriously - even when I disagree, I am bound by the
promise of my ordination and by canon law
to obey.

And so when Christ commands,
"Love the Lord your God with all your heart and mind and soul and strength
and love your neighbor
as yourself,"
we are bound to obey.
When Christ talks about caring for those in need,
we are bound to obey.
When Christ demands that we give generously to the work of God
we are bound to obey.
Worshipping God in community at least weekly,
giving generously of what we have received - Jesus thinks of the tithe as a minimum -
using our gifts in the serve of God and the church,
all these are things that are commanded by God in Scripture.

We might like being told what to do,
but as followers of Christ
we have voluntarily put ourselves under his authority.
And that's actually
good news.
As the centurion found
when Jesus healed his slave,
and so many faithful Christians have found,
as they have heard and obeyed the call of God,
they have been blessed.

And so the question
hangs in the air.
Are we willing to obey
the authority
of Christ?