Second Sunday in Lent

‘Lord I am not worthy that you should come under my roof, but speak the word only, and my servant shall be healed’

These are words we know well, not just from hearing them in our reading this morning, but because we say a form them in every communion service, just before we approach the altar to receive communion.

I don’t know about you, but I’ve always found them a bit puzzling.

They’re puzzling in context: what does the centurion mean when, instead of dragging Jesus to his house to cure his servant, he instead says ‘Lord I am not worthy that you should come under my roof, but speak the word only, and my servant shall be healed’?

From Jesus’ response: ‘truly I tell you, nowhere in Israel have I found such faith’….we learn that he not a Jew but a Gentile. His words might therefore be read as those of someone conscious that they really have no grounds for asking anything at all of Jesus – the acutely embarrassed, self-conscious and self-effacing words of someone who is well aware he is an outsider, an alien; that he addresses Jesus not as a member of the chosen race of Israel but as one of the heathen outcasts. And so he does what most of us what would do in the circumstances: try to cause as little fuss as possible; draw as little attention to himself as possible; humbles himself in deference – and insist that it isn’t really at all necessary for Jesus to put himself out, go anywhere or even do anything - he just needs to say a few words.

But is this really what lies behind the centurion’s words? Jesus certainly doesn’t hear them like this. He hears them as a confident statement of faith; coming from an unwavering, unfaltering conviction that, of course he does have the power to heal; he needs do no more than speak and it will be done.

There is indeed an extraordinary mixture of humility and confidence in the centurion’s words: a sense of real unworthiness to be asking anything at all of Jesus and yet an absolute certainty that what he is asking can be done, if only Jesus will hear him. And so he speaks.
But why, in turn, does he ask Jesus to speak? ‘Speak the word only, and my servant shall be
healed’. We sometimes say ‘Just say the word’ or even ‘Just say the word and it will be done’, not
realising that we are almost exactly echoing the centurion’s words. What does saying a word do?
Well, in Jesus world, words were thought to have power; they didn’t just voice things; they did things. They had an almost magical quality to bring something into existence or make something
happen. Think of the many times in the Gospels when Jesus simply says something, and then
something dramatic happens: the waves are stilled; demons are driven out, the madman’s sanity
returns; the blind see; the deaf hear; the lame walk; the dead come to life when Jesus says: ‘Be
Still’; ‘Begone Satan!’; ‘Ephphatha’; ‘arise, take up your bed, and walk’; ‘talitha cumi’; ‘Lazarus,
come out’

Words could curse, bind, smite, and destroy; but they could also bless, liberate and heal. It’s the
same for us: when we swear an oath, or say ‘I do’; when we curse and swear; when we voice our
deepest, heartfelt desires in words, we are also demonstrating our belief that words have power.
Where do they get this power from?

You will remember that in the book of Genesis creation comes into being as a result of God’s
words: each of the six days is punctuated by the phrase: ‘And God said…’ ‘And God said, let
there be light’….And God said let there be a vault between the waters…’ and so on. But even
before the coming into existence of creation as a result of God’s powerful word, Christian
theology believes that the very Word by which God speaks, that is, the eternal Word, begotten of
the Father’s substance - the divine, co-eternal Word of God who is the second person of the
Divine Trinity - was eternally brought forth by God. It is this Word which the Christian faith
then believes was at work in Creation: it is through this Word, this expression of eternal, divine
creativity, generativity and self giving, that creation is formed, providentially ordered and
continually sustained.

So, in answer to the question, where do words get their power from?, I would like to suggest that
God’s words have power because they are from God, of God and in God. The divine nature is
characterised by its speaking, eternally - from the Father, through the Son and in the Holy Spirit.
And this speaking does not end with God: as we saw in Genesis, creation comes into being from
the Father, through his Word, in the Holy Spirit. And this speaking does not end with creation;
creation is providentially ordered and sustained, from the beginning until now and to the world to come, from the Father, through his Word and in the Holy Spirit.

The story of the centurion is puzzling not just because he seems unwilling for Jesus to visit his house, but also because he clearly believes that through speaking, Jesus will miraculously cure his servant. Miracles are always difficult for us to get our minds round. They are works of power – here the power of words. But they seem to go against the ordinary, expected, everyday course of things, and turn them upside down, subvert and reverse them. They defy explanation in terms of the laws of nature or rules of physics. But I think that what we have just discovered about God’s eternal nature and the power of words might enable us to begin to understand them- at least in terms of faith, if not of reason.

We have discovered that God creates, orders and sustains the whole of creation through his Word; his speaking. All that was, is and will be is the result of God’s creative, providential, sustaining work through his Word. But there is a problem: instead of responding to God by acknowledging our complete and utter dependence on Him, who is our Creator and the one who sustains us in being, human beings have turned away from Him; they have thought themselves independent and self sufficient; they have acted on the basis that they do not need God and have refused to worship him in loving service. We have disrupted the good order and providence of God and turned it upside down; we have subverted and reversed it, so that, without God’s saving grace, we will perish. But the extraordinary thing is: he does not let us perish; rather, as we have just seen in today’s miracle story, God works precisely through the unexpected, the subversive and the disruptive; through works that turn things upside down, and he does this in order to return us to Himself: in other words, he works through miracles.

The greatest miracle and the most subversive, unexpected act of God is, of course His becoming incarnate; his coming, as the centurion puts it, ‘under our roof’, to take flesh and become a human being for our sake.

In this light, we might now see the centurion’s extraordinary faith for what it is - for he says to Jesus, ‘Lord I am not worthy that you should come under my roof’ – in other words, he says ‘Lord I am not worthy that you should take flesh/a human body for my sake’. And then he adds ‘but speak the word only and my servant shall be healed’ – in other words, he says ‘but as the eternal, all-powerful Word of God, you can heal my servant simply by speaking’. The centurion,
in other words, has apprehended that Jesus is God, the eternal, all-powerful Word and therefore he simply ask the eternal, all-powerful Word of the Father to do what he always does: to create, order and sustain his creation – in this instance, to heal his servant.

His faith is indeed great. What of ours? What do we mean when, before approaching the alter to receive our Lord’s body and blood, we say: ‘Lord, I am not worthy that you should come under my roof, but speak the word only, and I shall be healed’. I suspect that we echo the centurion’s humility, his sense of unworthiness that Jesus should come under his roof – or enter a human body - for his sake; we perhaps also share something of his faith, his unwavering, unquestioning conviction that Jesus is the eternal Word of God, whose Word alone can heal. But unlike the centurion, we now know that it was not by his spoken word alone, or by a miracle, that Jesus, the incarnate Word, healed us, but by this death. We know that he has indeed come under our roof – has become man – so that he might dwell in us, die for us, and only thus, enable us to participate in his Godhead. However unworthy we feel, we must approach the altar to receive his broken body and his blood outpoured. Only in this way can we be healed.

To him, our Saviour and Redeemer, be all glory and honour, now and to the ages, Amen.