

Sermon: 3rd Sunday after Epiphany

Text: Matthew 8:1-13 (v.10)

Theme: A double miracle

Goal: To encourage all to come to Jesus in every situation, with humbleness and faith.

Dear Friends,

Introduction: I had the opportunity to go to our church in Munich, Germany, on Epiphany Day, Friday, 6th January. It was their Mission Festival. The invited pastor from Berlin preached and did a presentation after the Service about the mission that has been done among Iranian and Afghan refugees, most of them of Muslim background. While many are seeing the refugees as a problem, the church is looking to them as a mission opportunity to share Christ and His love.

He said that his congregation was an old, traditional small church. The building was even too big for the size of the congregation and they were planning to demolish the old church and to build a smaller one. Then the first two converted Muslims came transferred from Leipzig. It was a shock for him and for the congregation. But they came to talk to the pastor, explained their situation and confessed their faith in Jesus. The story is long, but, in short: They have now around 1,500 baptized ex-Muslims; the congregation had to rent another bigger church nearby; and the church doesn't stop growing.

Some points that the pastor highlighted: a) The converted Muslims really practice the mission challenge "everyone brings someone else". They witness at home and among their relatives and friends, in spite of the threat of being rejected by the family and expelled from their fellowship. – b) They come *every* Sunday to the Service, and not just once or twice a month, as many of

the traditional German Lutheran do it. – c) The pastor doesn't need to do outreach, to visit them: They just come and bring others! – And the pastor challenged the small, traditional and conservative church in Munich: Do you want to grow and to share Christ with others? Or do you just want to remain a closed club to serve yourselves?

Why do I share this experience with you as introduction to the Gospel of today? Because we, as St. Thomas, have something to learn from this experience; and because the main character of the Gospel for today is a foreigner, someone, who had nothing to do with the traditional way of worshipping God in the synagogue of Capernaum (or in the Lutheran Church). He was even a representative of the oppressors, of the Roman army, who had subjugated the people of Israel. And even so, Jesus praised his faith and his prayer was answered.

I – The faith of a Gentile

“When Jesus heard this, he was astonished and said to those following him, “I tell you the truth, I have not found anyone in Israel with such great faith.”

The Centurion was in charge of one hundred soldiers to maintain control, order and peace in the city. The Roman army was famous for its cruelty and harsh actions. To receive this position as a Centurion, this man must have been a brave soldier and much blood had been flowed through his hands. But living among the Jews, and listening to their stories, especially about their hope in a Messiah, something changed in his life. And he also became aware of several healing stories about a man called Jesus. Should He be the promised Messiah?

In any case, when his servant became very sick, and the Centurion heard that Jesus was around, he went to Jesus asking for help. – First, what amazes me is his concern about his

servant. Usually masters didn't care about their servants. But the centurion was suffering with the suffering of his servant and wanted to help him. – Second, it is his humbleness, in spite that he was a chief, a centurion. When Jesus was ready to go to his house to help the servant, the centurion didn't accept it. He considered himself unworthy to receive Jesus' visit. Luther wrote in his own words the argument of the centurion: *O Lord, why would you even bother with me? I am wicked, you are holy; I am a sinner, you are righteous. Indeed, I have heard that you do great miracles in Israel, that you restore health to the sick, and I dearly wanted to have my sick servant helped; but I consider myself unworthy for you to come into my house.* (Phil Brandt, p. 37). And then he said: Say just one word, Lord, and my servant will be healed.

Just one word. He was a man of authority and his servants had to obey him. So, he believed that Jesus was a man of authority as well, and just one word would be enough to heal the servant. – Just one word, the word of God, is powerful to perform miracles. And this is the first miracle of this story: The faith of the centurion.

II – Jesus' miracles.

Jesus didn't heal everyone who was sick in His time. Just some were healed as a confirmation of His divine power. But He called many to faith through His Word. The advertisements of several churches promising the healing of every sickness is a lie. Jesus still can do miracles and heal people; and He does, when he wants to! But the bigger miracle he wants to perform in the life of every person is the miracle of faith through His Word. And this miracle is still happening among us, among the refugees in Germany, among the people in Mozambique and all around the world. He just needs that His Word be proclaimed so that people know Him and trust in Him. Physical miracles are important and

God gives us good medical resources to prolong our lives. But once all will die. Spiritual miracle – the miracle of faith – remains forever and gives eternal life.

Conclusion: Luther wrote about this Gospel: *We see from this what is the best and most acceptable service before God, namely nothing pleases our Lord God more than that we believe and trust in him from the heart. The Lord, our God, does not ask for beautiful temples or splendid, shiny works; but rather for inner devotion of the heart, that is, for faith... We should, therefore, know that when we serve God from the heart, with faith, we are then his servants, priests, children, and heirs, who will be with him in heaven.* (Phil Brandt, p. 36).

Humbleness and faith. This is the way to approach Jesus. Humbleness means that we desparate on ourselves, knowing that we are not able to do anything to help us or to help others. And faith means that we rely only on Christ for everything we need: for our spiritual needs and for our physical needs.

The promise of Jesus is still being accomplished: “Many will come from the east and from the west, and will take their places at the feast with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven.” God is calling unexpected people to faith in Christ and to His Kingdom, as it is happening in Germany, Mozambique and other places. We need to open our eyes to see the opportunities to witness and to welcome those whom God is bringing also to St. Thomas. Maybe we will not grow to 1,500 members; but we cannot accommodate ourselves in our comfort zone, just being served. God has big plans for His Kingdom and He wants us to be part of His plans. With humbleness and faith, we approach His throne, asking for forgiveness and help, and we will hear His words as the centurion heard: “Go! It will be done just as you believed it would.” Amen.