

Say the word and I shall be healed

Luke 7 v1 – 10

In these days of Risk Assessment and 24-hour Emergency Cover we rather take it for granted that when we find our lives in jeopardy we will be saved. While we don't have Superman, a comic book hero inspired by the story of Moses, we do at least have the police, firemen, paramedics, coastguards and lifeboat-men on hand to get us out of trouble. The RNLI, for whom we are collecting today as part of their national fund-raising week, is an extraordinarily effective organisation. Every lifeboat station, lifeboat and lifeboat-man is paid for out of our voluntary donations, not from government funding, yet we take it all for granted.

According to the RNLI website, the fine bank holiday weather last weekend kept the volunteer crews busy, with lifeboats launching over two hundred times during the long weekend; the large all-weather lifeboats were launched sixty-one times, and the inflatable inshore lifeboats were launched one hundred and forty-six times. The vast majority of launches were to leisure craft and people in danger of drowning, or in need of medical attention. Sheerness proved to be one of the busiest stations during the Bank Holiday period with both lifeboats launching a total of eleven times.

There have been some unbelievable stories of foolhardy sailors attempting insane crossings of the Channel in un-seaworthy vessels being plucked helpless from the sea. There are heroic accounts of lifeboat-men risking their lives to save experienced and seasoned yachtsmen caught in freak accidents and storms. There are heartening stories of families reunited with children swept out to sea from beaches. In every case the RNLI's volunteers exhibit unconditional and selfless service.

It does not matter how you get into difficulty, as long as someone raises the alarm, every attempt will be made to save you. What we cannot be sure about is how many people drown each year because no one thinks it necessary to call out the lifeboat. Reckless teenagers and arrogant old sea-dogs are equally likely to reckon they can manage all right thank-you-very-much. Even when that lifeboat-man reaches out his hand through the waves, we must humble ourselves to take it, and not let ourselves be dragged away by the currents and our sodden clothes weighing us down. The Christian parallels are obvious.

In today's Gospel, we heard about a Roman Centurion, a man who was not a Jew, turning unconditionally to Christ for help. The Centurion cared so much for his servants that he was prepared to go to extraordinary lengths to save them. He sends a messenger to find Jesus. Yet he does not summon Jesus to attend to his sick servant as if he were demanding his rights as a Roman officer to

have a home-call doctor sort out the irritating inconvenience of a sick slave. The Centurion has faith that Christ can and will heal his servant, and without even the need to tend him physically. Jesus says he has not found such faith even in Israel.

Throughout the New Testament we recognise the symbolism of healing sickness as forgiving sin. Sin is that gulf that separates us from God; our imperfections, our very humanity makes us fail to live up to the image of God in which we are created. But Jesus has held out his hands, his arms wide upon the Cross, to save us and to bring us back to him. But the deeper this gulf is made through our continual failings, the more terrifying it is for us to take the step of faith towards God and hold out our hands to accept him.

Perhaps it was easy for the Centurion to recognise Jesus's authority; he was used to having his orders obeyed and knew that Jesus's word would be fulfilled. But I don't think it would have been that easy for a Roman to turn to Jesus in this way. While we are told by the Jewish elders that he is a worthy man, who loves Israel and has even built a synagogue, we are reminded that he is not a Jew. He is only too aware that he is not one of God's chosen people, but he was clearly not bound by racial prejudice. He is deeply humbled and earnest in wanting his Jewish servant saved and is prepared to plead on his behalf, "Lord, do not trouble yourself, for I am not worthy to receive you under my roof; therefore I did not presume to come to you. But say the word, and let my servant be healed."

Saint Augustine wrote: "By declaring himself unworthy, the centurion showed himself worthy of having Christ, the Word of God, enter not just his house, but his heart. Nor could he have said this with so much faith and humility, had he not carried in his heart Him whom he feared to have in his house. And indeed it would have been no great blessedness that Jesus should enter within his walls, if He had not already entered into his heart."

In today's Eucharist we meet Christ in the Blessed Sacraments of the Altar, the Bread and Wine, and we pray humbly before taking our Holy Communion, "Lord I am not worthy to receive you, but only say the word and I shall be healed."

Let us pray that we can open our hearts to the Lord that he may show his love through us and for us, that we too, like the Centurion's servant, may be saved.