

“The Most Extraordinary Person President Carter Has Met”

Matthew 8:5-13

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How many people do you think President Carter has met? No doubt it would be several thousands. Of these, how many do you think he knows well? Quite a few I would imagine. This makes his statement at Mattie Stepanek’s funeral all the more astonishing.

Mattie Stepanek was the thirteen-year-old poet/peacemaker that died of complications related to muscular dystrophy on June 22, 2004. Mattie was the author of five books of poetry that sold millions and was a forceful advocate of muscular dystrophy awareness. Nearly one thousand people gathered at a church in Wheaton, Maryland to honor him, including Oprah Winfrey, Montel Williams, “Lord of the Rings” star, Sean Austin and country singer Billy Gilman.

At his funeral, President Carter said, “Out of all the people I have met, including Kings, Prime Ministers and Presidents, Mattie Stepanek was the most extraordinary.” Perhaps you would not have expected this former President to say this. It was a bit of a shock but certainly a great tribute to this remarkable young man. It had to make his family even prouder of him.

Jesus’ words about a Roman soldier had to send shock waves throughout his religious community, too. After hearing that this centurion had the faith to believe that Jesus could heal his servant without even coming to his home, Jesus remarked, “I tell you the truth, I have not found anyone in Israel with such great faith” Matthew 8:10.

Did Jesus not know many people? Had he not met the ranking religious leaders in Jerusalem? What about his own disciples? Surely they had more faith than this Gentile soldier. No, they didn’t and neither had anyone else that Jesus met and he was bold enough to say it!

Who was this man, anyway? Just as President Carter’s eulogy created a lot of interest in Mattie Stepanek, I suspect Jesus’ glowing compliment of this Roman soldier put him in the limelight. So, who was he?

He was a high-ranking officer in the Roman military in charge of one hundred men. He had a lot of clout and wielded a considerable amount of power. As a result, he was accustomed to people making requests. This time, however, he sought Jesus to talk to him about his servant who was gravely ill. No doubt he wanted Jesus’ help, but before he could even make a request, Jesus volunteered to go to his home and heal his servant.

It was at this point in the story that the centurion said, “Lord, I do not deserve to have you come under my roof. Just say the word and my servant will be healed. For I am a man under authority with soldiers under me. I tell this one, ‘Go,’ and he goes and that one ‘Come,’ and he comes. I say to my servant, ‘Do this,’ and he does it” Matthew 8:8-9.

What was Jesus’ reaction to the centurion’s words of compassion, respect and faith? “When Jesus heard this, he was astonished” Matthew 8:10a.

I think Jesus was overwhelmed and amazed that someone had this much confidence in him and would display it so boldly. Even he had to be surprised that the deepest level of faith that he had encountered came not from a religious leader or one of his own disciples, but from a Roman soldier.

What was Jesus' response to the centurion's humility, sincerity and confidence in him? "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. I say to you that many will come from the east and the west and will take their places at the feast with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven. But the subjects of the kingdom will be thrown outside, into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.' Then Jesus said, 'Go, it will be done just as you believed it would.' And his servant was healed at that very hour" Matthew 8:10-13.

It appeared that Jesus did four things in response to the centurion's bold words. First of all, he complimented the centurion for his faith.

Secondly, he stated that anyone that approached God with the centurion's humble attitude and faith would be welcomed into the kingdom. And he meant anyone, even Gentiles.

Thirdly, Jesus warned those that did not have the centurion's sincerity, compassion, humility and faith that they would be excluded from the kingdom. Neither their pedigree nor their hollow rituals would secure them a permanent place in the kingdom of God. You can imagine how quickly this word spread among the religious leaders in Jerusalem, the self-appointed keepers of the kingdom keys.

Finally, he healed the centurion's servant without ever going to his home. What a day of rejoicing this must have been for all that loved him.

As I dwell upon this story, the part that captures my attention the most focuses upon Jesus' reaction and response to the centurion's faith. "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.'"

Would Jesus pay you this compliment today? Have you ever turned his head with something you said? What could you do that would capture his attention and cause him to affirm you? I've given this some thought this week and want to share some suggestions with you.

I think Jesus would be astonished and touched...

... if I said that forgiveness is more powerful than revenge and turned an enemy into a friend.

...if I said that faith is more powerful than fear and accepted a bold challenge.

...if I said that one person can make a difference and proceeded to prove it.

...if I said that I am of great value and worth and resisted the temptation to cheapen life by letting my passions and desires control me.

...if I said that no talent is insignificant and worked hard to achieve all my potential.

...if I said that cultivating relationships and loving others is more important than collecting possessions and amassing a fortune and arranged my priorities to reflect this.

...if I said that being a good role model for my children is more important than satisfying selfish desires and refused to do anything that would confuse them.

...if I said that being faithful and good to my mate is more important than exerting my independence and refused to be promiscuous and rude.

...if I said that pursuing liberty and justice for all is life's greatest calling and became a spokesman for the voiceless and an advocate for the powerless.

...if I said that one reason I have been blessed is to be a blessing to others and looked for ways everyday to help others.

...if I said that I want to be a wise and faithful steward and sought His will for the use of all my time, talents and resources.

...if I said that violence breeds violence and sought innovative ways to diffuse anger and reconcile differences.

...if I said that a life of integrity is more important than a life of pleasure and refused to do anything that would compromise my convictions.

...if I said that trading love is fine but giving it away is better and helped those that could do nothing for me in return.

...if I said that all people are God's children and befriended those that are different from me.

...if I said that no one has a corner on truth and listened to and learned from everyone that I meet.

...if I said that peacemaking and peacekeeping are life's loftiest goals and became a bridge across which enemies could walk and settle their differences.

...if I said that some things are worth dying for and then lived to see them become reality.

...if I said that death was not man's greatest enemy but indifference and selfishness and as a result became more compassionate and generous.

I wonder how often Jesus was "astonished" during his ministry on earth? Not enough I imagine. I wonder how often he is amazed today because of the faith of his followers. Perhaps the best way to answer this is by determining the last time you caught his attention by something that you said or did. Give it some thought even as I challenge you to take your faith in him to another level and trust Jesus as this bold centurion did.