

The Centurion

Matthew 8:5-13; Luke 7:1-10

Year C Proper 4 ; Year C Epiphany 9

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Parts by scene

■ = large part ▲ = medium sized part ● = small part

		1	2	3	4	5	6	7
▲	Friend of the Centurion - a fellow officer	▲		▲		▲		
■	Centurion - a good man seeking help for his servant	▲		▲		▲		■
▲	James - the most officious disciple, often the most frustrated with Jesus' unconventional decisions (such as his allowing women to join the group)		●		▲		■	
▲	John - the gentlest and most caring of the disciples		●				▲	
●	Peter - the most headstrong disciple, and the least afraid of a fight, but never the smartest person in the room		●					
▲	Judas - possibly the deepest thinker and best organizer, the one who usually sees the big picture most clearly, and also the disciple with the best sense of humor		●				■	
●	Andrew - the younger brother of Peter, one of the youngest disciples		●		▲			
▲	Thomas - the skeptic, who really wants to believe because of his emotional bond with the others, but can't simply ignore his doubts				▲		▲	
●	Matthew - a former tax collector (i.e. a agent of the Roman occupation of his own people) who in his repentance from that past life is the most religiously fervent of the disciples				▲			
▲	Servant of the Centurion					▲		▲
●	Phillip - one of the youngest disciples, always well-meaning and honestly curious, sometimes lacking in confidence						▲	
▲	Jesus						▲	

Scene 1

Centurion , Friend

{The home of a Roman centurion, who's being visited by a fellow centurion.}

- Friend** So, my friend, what have you been doing cooped up in your house all this week? I heard you requested some leave and assumed you were taking a holiday.
- Centurion** My man is ill, and it's pretty bad. I had him brought here to die.
- Friend** I'm sorry to hear that. He was a good soldier.
- Centurion** What? Oh! No, I'm not talking about my aide. It's my personal servant.
- Friend** *[suddenly uneasy]* But isn't he a...native?
- Centurion** Yes, I hired him from the town. I needed help with the house and didn't think it would be right to use military personnel.
- Friend** *[grimly]* Well, that explains it.
- Centurion** Explains what?
- Friend** Why you sent for an Israeli healer.
- Centurion** *[in surprise]* How did you know...? *[soberly, as he realizes what's happening]*
This is not a social visit, is it?

Scene 2

Andrew , James , John , Judas , Peter

{The disciples are waiting for Jesus' return to their camp.}

James *[annoyed]* He's late.

John I'm sure he'll be here soon.

James He's supposed to meet with some potential donors in one hour, you know!

Peter Don't worry, he won't be late.

Judas *[amused]* You mean like he wasn't late last week for that preaching engagement, or the week before for that meeting with the synagogue leader?

John He does lose track of time when he's off by himself praying, but he's got Andrew and Phillip with him this time.

James *[sarcastically]* Yeah, that'll help.

{Andrew enters.}

Judas Speak of the devil! But where are the others?

Andrew They sent me ahead. They're going to be late.

Scene 3

Centurion , Friend

{Back at the Centurion's home.}

Friend Command received a report that you'd sent for a native healer.

Centurion That's right. I'll admit it's a desperate move, but the doctors say they can't do anything more for him.

Friend That's all very well, and I can certainly understand trying everything to save someone who matters to you, but your servant's an Israeli, a local.

Centurion And a human being.

Friend *[sitting down and lowering his voice]* Listen, we're old friends. I shouldn't be telling you this, but...there have been whispers about you at

Command. That you've become unduly entangled in the affairs of the locals, that you're unduly soft on them. Not only do you take a week off to nurse this...servant of yours, but you call for an Israeli healer, and you do it through the local religious authorities!

Centurion *[trying earnestly to explain himself]* I tried all the army doctors first, and going through the local leaders seemed the best chance I had to reach this man. I honestly believe he can help. I heard him speak once, and -

Friend *[interrupting angrily]* You're a Roman! *[pausing to let it sink in]* You. Are. A. Roman! These people are your subjects! You don't go begging to them for help; you command! And in any case, there's no chance your healer will come. *[sarcastically]* They don't deign to enter the homes of foreigners, you know!

Centurion *[calmly]* Actually, that won't be a problem.

Scene 4

Andrew , James , Matthew , Thomas

{Back at the disciples' camp.}

James He's going to be late! He's going to be late, he says! What did I tell you? I just knew this would happen!

Thomas *[to Andrew]* Did the rabbi say why?

Andrew Someone asked him to heal a dying man in the town just to the east, so he and Phillip are taking a detour there.

Matthew That's the town where the Roman garrison is located, isn't it?

Andrew Yeah. In fact, the sick man is one of the centurion's servants.

James *[incredulous outrage]* The rabbi is going to heal the servant of a Roman centurion?

Andrew *[innocently]* Yeah, what's wrong with that?

James *[sternly]* The Romans are our enemies! Have you forgotten we're an occupied nation? The rabbi, whose mission is to liberate the nation, is about to give aid and comfort to our oppressors!

Thomas *[half to himself]* He seems not to care about that kind of thing at all: ally or enemy, saint or sinner, rich or poor. He helps them all. I don't know what to make of it. Who is he? What is he?

Matthew This man might be an exception. If he's the same centurion I've heard about, he's a great supporter of our people.

James *[sarcastically]* And you'd know all about supporting our people, wouldn't you?

Matthew *[earnestly]* Yes! Yes, I would. Because I didn't. I was a traitor. I collected taxes for the Romans. I put my own greed above the good our people. But this Roman has spent his own money for us. He financed the construction of a temple!

James It's always easier to rule if you throw the population a few bones. That's all he's doing.

Andrew James, you're a bigger doubter than Thomas sometimes!

James I have no doubts at all. This arrogant son of a -

Thomas *[interrupting]* Whoa! How is he arrogant? He went to the rabbi asking for his help.

James Sent for him, you should have said. Like a rich man clapping for his afternoon tea. "Come here! Do this! Snap snap!"

Matthew Andrew, is that how the man was?

Andrew I don't know, I wasn't there when he came. And it might not have been him in person, either. It might have been a messenger.

James That's even worse! Sending a flunky with his orders!

Scene 5

Centurion , Friend , Servant

{Back at the Centurion's house.}

Friend What do you mean, "it won't be a problem?" Are you planning to bow and and scrape at his feet as well, and beg him to please not turn up his nose at your house?

Centurion He won't be coming here.

Friend But I thought...did you call it off, then? *[whewing in relief]* That's a relief!

Centurion No, I sent a second message.

Friend A second message? What did it say?

{At that moment, the Servant of the Centurion, who has been healed, comes stumbling out of his room.}

Servant Sir?

Centurion *[joyfully]* Great gods be praised!

Friend Is this your servant? But I thought you said...

Servant *[seeing the second officer in the room]* Sir! *[looks around more carefully at the room]* What am I doing here?

Centurion You've been sick. I had you brought here.

Servant Oh, sir, you shouldn't have. It's only a little fever, and I'm feeling much better now.

Centurion Do you know how long you've been here?

Servant *[trying to remember]* Well...it was just yesterday I took to bed...but that was *my* bed...

Centurion You've been lying unconcious here in my house for eight days.

Servant No! That can't be! *[a long pause as he takes stock of his own physical condition]* I'm ravenous.

Friend *[relieved and happy for his friend]* So this is your "dying" servant? Looks like he recovered just fine without your native healer. And now I can go back to headquarters and report that all is well.

Centurion You never heard what my second message to the "native healer" was. Don't you think you should include it in your report?

Friend Of course, of course! What was it?

Centurion You'd better sit down first. *[to the Servant]* You'd better both sit down!

Scene 6

James , Jesus , John , Judas , Phillip , Thomas

{Phillip arrives at the camp.}

Phillip Hey everybody!

James What are you doing here so soon? Is the rabbi with you?

Phillip He's right behind me.

Judas Did he not perform the requested healing, after all?

Phillip No, he did.

John Then how did you get here so fast?

Phillip Oh, we didn't have to go all the way to the town, after all. We got a message saying not to come, and asking the rabbi to just heal the servant from where he was.

Thomas You mean, heal the man from the road, while still miles away from the house?

Phillip Yup. So then we were able to come straight back.

Judas *[puzzled]* What a bizarre request! What kind of man makes a request like that?

John A man of great faith!

James You mean a man of great arrogance!

Judas Arrogance, really?

James Sure. It's obvious that he didn't care all that much about his servant after all. Otherwise, why set a crazy condition like that? "Come and heal my dying servant, but only if you can pat your head and rub your stomach while you're at it!" He just wanted to show he could order us around. First he thinks it would be fun to order up a healer to his door. Then he decides he doesn't want his

pagan home contaminated by "one of us".

John *[mildly]* I don't think that was it at all. It probably occurred to him that asking the rabbi to go out of his way could in fact be seen as arrogant. Or maybe he didn't feel like he was worthy to meet him face-to-face.

Judas Really, John? *You* might feel that way about the rabbi, but it's pretty farfetched to think a Roman centurion would. And James? It seems like the poor guy can't win with you. He's damned if he does and damned if he doesn't!

Thomas Phillip, did a third messenger come with news of the servant's healing?

Phillip No. Of if he did, he's still trying to catch up with us. We hightailed it back pretty quick because of the donors.

Thomas *[to everybody]* Don't take this wrong, but how do we know there was even a healing if we didn't see the servant healed?

James *[angrily]* Are you doubting the rabbi's power again?

{Thomas, James, Judas, and John begin to all speak at once. Hint: have each new reader launch into their bit just as the previous reader is finishing his or her first sentence for the best effect. Jesus should interrupt them before they begin to finish. Once Jesus speaks, everybody should stop their speech no matter where they are in it. If they get to the ends of their speeches before Jesus jumps in, they should just go back to the beginning the start speaking them again.}

Thomas *[simultaneously with the others]* No, no! All I'm saying is that we can't know for sure. Maybe there's wasn't even a sick servant. How can we know if they never went to the house?

James *[simultaneously with the others]* You know? I'm getting a little tired of your constant doubts. If you're going to follow the rabbi, you have to believe what he says. If you're going to join us, you can't be calling us idiots all the time...

Judas *[simultaneously with the others]* What is it with you people? I thought I was joining a noble cause, but all you do is fight. I'm seriously thinking about quitting this group...

John *[simultaneously with the others]* Please, let's not fight about this. We only have to wait, and then we'll know for sure. James, brother, please! Thomas, we hear what you're saying...

Jesus *[appearing suddenly in the door]* Peace!

James Rabbi!

Phillip We were just, uh...

John *[meekly]* Arguing. We were arguing. We're sorry.

Jesus *[mildly]* What were you arguing about?

Judas Thomas was doubting whether you really healed the centurion's servant.

Jesus *[with genuine curiosity]* Thomas, is this true?

Thomas *[summoning his courage]* Yes. It was not that I didn't believe you could do it. It was just: how did you know you succeeded if you never went to the house to check?

Jesus I have no answer that will satisfy you. I just knew. *[to Thomas]* I knew it as surely as you know you belong with us, though you don't yet understand why. As surely as another of you is uncertain he belongs.

{There's a brief silence while everyone ponders that.}

Judas Rabbi, there was another question we had. What was the attitude of this centurion? Was he humbly asking for your help, or arrogantly demanding it?

Jesus Why does that matter?

James Well...shouldn't it?

Jesus I would say he was both proud and humble. But neither was the reason his servant was healed.

Phillip What *was* the reason?

Jesus Many people come to me, some disbelieving, some wanting badly to believe, and some believing firmly. This man simply assumed!

James *[shocked at the centurion's presumption]* Such gall!

John *[correcting him]* Such faith! The greatest faith we've yet seen.

Thomas Greatest? I would say the smallest! How is it faith if you don't even have to try? Would you say I had great faith for believing the sun will rise tomorrow morning?

Judas Now I'm wondering if this man wasn't a little...touched. I mean, who says that? Why was it even something for him to have great faith *about*? To use Thomas' example, it would be like me asking the sun to rise in the west. Would you say I had great faith in that case?

James Rabbi, are you sure the man wasn't trying to make fun of you? Or talking down to you as if you were crazy? Or crazy himself?

Jesus The one thing you can be sure about is this: we'll never meet the likes of him again!

Scene 7

Centurion , Servant

{The Centurion's home after his fellow centurion has left.}

Servant Thank you, sir. I owe you my life!

Centurion It's not me that you should thank, but your healer. Maybe I can arrange for you to meet some day.

Servant *[meekly]* Sir, how did you know he could do it? How did you know he could do it without even coming to the house?

Centurion I know what you're asking. Why did I risk your life by imposing that condition? Believe me, I would have taken the same chance with my own life. Partly, it was a desperate request in the first place. On some level, I wasn't expecting it to succeed, anyway. But I felt like if it was going to succeed, it could succeed whether he came here or not.

Servant Why did you think that?

Centurion I met him once, and recognized right away that he was a commander just like me. I can recognize one anywhere, even if he's not in uniform, even if he belongs to a different army. And even, I know now, if that army is not of this world. And just as I can give you a command and not have to worry about whether it will be carried out, so I realized that he had only to issue a

command himself. He didn't need to be here to do that.

Servant I'm glad you were right about that.

Centurion I'm glad his chain of command turned out to be as efficient as ours!

*You can read my thoughts about this play and respond with your own at
www.WineskinProject.net/blog/centurion*

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