

## Reflection by David Kennedy

When Jesus had come down from the mountain, great crowds followed him, <sup>2</sup> and there was a man with a skin disease who came to him and knelt before him, saying, "Lord, if you are willing, you can make me clean." <sup>3</sup> He stretched out his hand and touched him, saying, "I am willing. Be made clean!" Immediately his skin disease was cleansed. <sup>4</sup> Then Jesus said to him, "See that you say nothing to anyone, but go, show yourself to the priest, and offer the gift that Moses commanded, as a testimony to them." <sup>5</sup> When he entered Capernaum, a centurion came to him, appealing to him <sup>6</sup> and saying, "Lord, my servant is lying at home paralyzed, in terrible distress." <sup>7</sup> And he said to him, "I will come and cure him." <sup>8</sup> The centurion answered, "Lord, I am not worthy to have you come under my roof, but only speak the word, and my servant<sup>[c]</sup> will be healed. <sup>9</sup> For I also am a man under authority, with soldiers under me, and I say to one, 'Go,' and he goes, and to another, 'Come,' and he comes, and to my slave, 'Do this,' and the slave does it." <sup>10</sup> When Jesus heard him, he was amazed and said to those who followed him, "Truly I tell you, in no one<sup>[d]</sup> in Israel have I found such faith. <sup>11</sup> I tell you, many will come from east and west and will take their places at the banquet with Abraham and Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven, <sup>12</sup> while the heirs of the kingdom will be thrown into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth." <sup>13</sup> And Jesus said to the centurion, "Go; let it be done for you according to your faith." And the servant<sup>[e]</sup> was healed in that hour. *Matthew 8. 1-13*

We are quickly coming towards the end of the Epiphany season. It concludes on Sunday with the great feast of Candlemas, the Presentation of Christ in the Temple. And during Epiphany we explore the reality of what it means for God to become incarnate in Jesus Christ. In other words, who is Jesus as the Son of God and the Son of Man?

Already we have reflected on the great three Epiphany stories, of the coming of the Magi, the Baptism of Jesus in the River Jordan and the turning of water into wine at the wedding at Cana of Galilee. And to these 3 stories the Prayer Book adds a fourth, this morning's gospel reading. Here, Jesus reveals himself as the healer.

First, he heals a leper. Leprosy in New Testament days covers a whole range of infectious skin diseases. So, lepers were separated, untouchable, unclean. They had to live apart in colonies. In fact, the Law of Moses stated lepers had to tear their clothes and they were forbidden to cover their heads, and if anyone came near them, they had to shout out 'Unclean, unclean'. They could neither work, nor worship. It was a poor and wretched existence. They relied on charity to bring them the basics of life. But note this leper was a man of deep faith. He came to Jesus, and bowed

down before him. He didn't demand, but in humility said to Jesus that if he were willing, Jesus could heal him. And Jesus invited him to stretch out his hand, and Jesus touched him; he touched the untouchable. Under Jewish understanding, this would make Jesus himself unclean. But wonderfully, he is healed, cleansed and restored.

Then we read of the Servant of the Gentile Roman Centurion at Capernaum, who was paralysed, or sick of the palsy as the Prayer Book expresses it, grievously tormented at home. Here a Gentile comes to Jesus just as the Gentile Magi came to worship him and bring him gifts. Again, Jesus responds positively and offers to go to the Centurion's house. But like the Leper, here, a Gentile shows remarkable faith – he understands Jesus' divine authority in those remarkable words 'I am not worthy that you should come under my roof – but only say the word, and my servant will be healed.

But he doesn't stop there; he makes a comparison. He as a Centurion was a man of authority – he could command people to come or go or fulfil whatever he desired. I identified a bit with that when I broke my knee last year. In the early months, I was immobile with my leg in a brace, but folk here were wonderful – I said to one 'Come', and they came, and to another, 'Go' and they went, and 'Do this', and they did it. It didn't last!

But we are told, Jesus marvelled and turned and addressed the crowds – I have not found such faith even in Israel. And of course, he spoke the word and immediately the servant was entirely healed.

These healing signs reveal Jesus as the one who will heal the nations, Jew and Gentile. Abraham's table is open to all – from north and south and east and west. Healing is by Jesus' powerful word – the servant never met Jesus, but Jesus healed him.

The Epiphany season invites us to strengthen our faith in Jesus as the key to human destiny; as the goal of human striving; as the end of all human journeying.

Our faith and labour are not in vain. Our task is to proclaim him by word and deed as the Saviour and Lord of the whole earth.

May our Church and our lives be an Epiphany of his love and presence.