

THE HAND OF HISTORY

TOLERANCE AND OPPRESSION

BIBLE STUDY 4

Reading: Matthew 8: 5-13; Luke 7: 1-10; John 4: 46-53.

COMMENT

The story of the Roman Centurion is told in the Gospels according to Saint Matthew and Saint Luke; in Saint John's Gospel he is an official. In the Palestine of Jesus' day, Roman Centurions were a key part of the ruling and occupying force. Even in the early Church, no Christian could join the Roman army. Everyone who heard this story in the early Church knew Roman Centurions were Pagans – they were obliged as part of their duties to offer sacrifices to the Emperor as a god.

No Jew of the day and no Christian in the early Church could have thought of a Roman Centurion as a man of faith. Yet this is a man who has built a synagogue for the people of Capernaum, and the elders of the town tell Jesus that "he loves our nation." Jesus commends him for his faith: "*Truly, I say to you, not even in Israel have I found such faith.*" The Centurion's servant is healed because of his faith and his belief.

The Centurion is not an oppressive figure or someone who abuses his powers and privileges. Although the Roman Empire

was the most powerful force known at the time, this Roman administrator was praised by the local people as a caring man who respected their faith and who encouraged them in the practice of their faith.



The Centurion admits that he too is subject to authority, and even protests that he is an unworthy figure at times.

He was seen as an outsider in religious terms, perhaps as someone who worshipped a strange god, or even as a polytheist. And yet, he is a protector of Jewish rights, encourages Jewish worship, and is commended for his faith.

He is so open to dialogue that his conversation with Jesus is recorded in three of the four Gospels. Jesus commends him for his faith, yet we are left not knowing his name nor knowing whether his dialogue with Jesus changed the nature of his faith or religious beliefs and practices.

CONTEXT

The dialogue between Jesus and the Centurion is a good example of how dialogue can take place between people who disagree, and when it appears that power and might are concentrated in one of the parties. Jesus appears as a travelling preacher, with a small band of followers, and little political or social power in the Palestine of the day. On the other hand, the Centurion represents stability, he has command of a large number of soldiers and servants who do as he commands, and he is the physical embodiment of political and social power. While Jesus represents the Kingdom of God, few people watching this encounter could have known this; he is the servant king rather than the commander of servants. The Centurion, on the other hand, represents the most powerful Empire known in the world at that time.

When we enter dialogue with Muslims, and when we get to know their religious beliefs and practices, we cannot determine where that dialogue will lead. We can come to respect the other people engaged in our dialogue as people of faith, even when we disagree with them on some fundamental issues.

Just as Jesus recognised that the Centurion had a spark of faith, Jesus recognised his compassion too. We must look for this spark of faith in others and warm to their compassion.

Jesus enters into dialogue with the Centurion without fixed pre-conceptions, and without fear. In this part of the world, many of us have fixed ideas about Muslims that hinder rather than help our participation in dialogue. These include issues surrounding the spread of Islam in the early Christian world and our historical memories, our perceptions of Islam as a religion of conquest; our worries about what Muslims might think or believe about God and about Jesus; our fears of *jihad*, which is often used as a value-laden term without understanding how Muslims perceive the concept; and our perception that many people in Islamic societies are oppressed or marginalised, including women.

Our DVD is located in Egypt, a country with a large Muslim majority, but with a large Christian minority too, and a long history of Muslims and Christians engaging with each other. It is said that Muhammad visited the Sinai Peninsula as a trader. In 635 AD, the monks of Mount Sinai sent a

delegation to Muhammad for his patronage and protection. The request was granted, and the document exhibited in the Library at Saint Catherine's Monastery promises that Muslims would protect the Christian monks and their monastery. It was a promise that has been honoured since the seventh century. Under Islamic rule,



Christianity was given a privileged (if inferior) position and its followers were respected as "People of the Book." But it is only in recent times through the process of Christian Muslim Dialogue that Christians are being recognised as equal.

CONVERSATION

READ St Matthew 8: 5-13; St Luke 7: 1-10; and St John 4: 46-53.

PRAY

WATCH Watch DVD Chapters 5, 6

TALK

- What should our purpose be when we enter into dialogue with Muslims?
- How can we challenge oppression and discrimination in our own situation as well as in others?
- Is it possible to deal with disagreement within dialogue? If so, how?
- What are the appropriate Christian responses to war and violence, and to our own legacy of religious-based violence?
- In the story of the Centurion of Capernaum, Jesus tells us "many will come from east and west and sit at the table with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in the Kingdom of Heaven." Do you think that Muslims too, as Children of Abraham, are called into the Kingdom of Heaven? Why?

CONTEMPLATION

In many parts of the world, conflicts between Christians and Muslims often result in violence that leads to death. Christians in Palestine often feel squeezed between Israeli Zionism on one hand, and Islamic militants on the other. In Pakistan, Christian churches have been burned when Christians have been accused falsely of blasphemy. Christians in some Muslim countries, including Saudi Arabia, suffer discrimination in many walks of life.

Violence and discrimination like this is not always representative of the values of the overwhelming majority of Muslims. The Quran tells Muslims "There is no compulsion in religion" (Sura 2.256). For the majority of Muslims, Christians must be respected as people of the book, and their freedom to exercise and practice their religion must be respected.

WHAT ABOUT JIHAD?

For many people the overwhelming impression of Islam in our society is the image in the media of militant Muslims who appear to be waging a war against our societies and our values. But all religious

communities know that their religious values have been used and abused for political ends by extremists and fanatics, and even by people who have no real religious commitment at all.



The concept of *jihad* is often translated as "holy war". However, "holy war" is a Christian concept, developed around the time of the Crusades and before the development of the "just war" theory. The word *jihad* means "struggle" and does not necessarily apply to war. All Muslims engage in an internal *jihad*, a battle for the control and sanctification of the soul; it is common to hear Muslims in sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia speak of a *jihad* for development; many Muslims speak today of a *jihad* for justice and peace, and some

Muslim women speak comfortably of a *jihad* for women's rights.

RACISM AND ISLAMOPHOBIA

Although Islam is not an ethnic identity, many Muslims suffer discrimination similar in expression, hatred and violence to racism. This hatred and discrimination is so widespread that it is now known as 'Islamophobia'. There has been a noticeable rise in Islamophobia in Europe and North America since 11 September 2001, with Muslims cast as the aggressors. While Muslims are often asked, as a body, to accept responsibility and blame for attacks such as those on New York, Madrid and London, they are also asked to accept that the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan are not wars against Islam.

The media often fail to differentiate between Muslims as individuals or divergent societies on the one hand, and, on the other, a religious society that is often seen as a unified threat against Western society and values. Racism and similar expressions of hatred that lead to people being isolated, discriminated against and suffering are always repugnant to Christianity.