

Jesus heals a Centurions servant

Luke 7v1-10 and Matthew 8 v5-13.

Luke 7 v1-10 When Jesus had finished saying all this to the people who were listening, he entered Capernaum. ²There a centurion's servant, whom his master valued highly, was sick and about to die. ³The centurion heard of Jesus and sent some elders of the Jews to him, asking him to come and heal his servant. ⁴When they came to Jesus, they pleaded earnestly with him, "This man deserves to have you do this, ⁵because he loves our nation and has built our synagogue."⁶ So Jesus went with them. He was not far from the house when the centurion sent friends to say to him: "Lord, don't trouble yourself, for I do not deserve to have you come under my roof. ⁷That is why I did not even consider myself worthy to come to you. But say the word, and my servant will be healed. ⁸For I myself 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."⁹ When Jesus heard this, he was amazed at him, and turning to the crowd following him, he said, "I tell you, I have not found such great faith even in Israel."¹⁰ Then the men who had been sent returned to the house and found the servant well.

Matthew 8 v5-13 ⁵When Jesus had entered Capernaum, a centurion came to him, asking for help. ⁶"Lord," he said, "my servant lies at home paralyzed, suffering terribly."⁷ Jesus said to him, "Shall I come and heal him?"⁸ The centurion replied, "Lord, I do not deserve to have you come under my roof. But just say the word, and my servant will be healed. ⁹For I myself 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."¹⁰ When Jesus heard this, he was amazed and said to those following him, "Truly I tell you, I have not found anyone in Israel with such great faith. ¹¹I 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. ¹²But the subjects of the kingdom will be thrown outside, into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth."¹³ Then Jesus said to the centurion, "Go! Let it be done just as you believed it would." And his servant was healed at that moment.

Extra reading **Romans 10v10-17** .. finishes .. "faith comes from *hearing* the message, and the message is heard through the word of Christ". – note true also of *seeing* the message, and *living* the message!

Introduction

We are told that "You've got to have faith". But what is Faith? How do we get it? How much faith do we need? If it is faith in God, or faith in Jesus we are talking about, then can God still do work in me and through me even if I haven't got very much of it? These are challenging but important questions. To give us a window into our understanding of faith then we are going to look at a man today that Jesus said had great faith, and that's the Centurion based at Capernaum. In this account from the life of Jesus, we see him heal the Centurion servant from a distance by just saying it will happen.

It is a remarkable account, and an important moment in the teaching and healing ministry of Jesus, particularly for his followers. So we will first look at why this miracle was so important back then. We'll then look a bit deeper as to what we can learn about faith from the Centurion, and explore how we might have a strong level of faith in our own lives.

Outside the family of Faith

The Jews did, and still do, see themselves living in a storyline which is still being revealed. All the events from Abraham to the troubles in Palestine today are part of Gods already written story or plan for the Jewish people, his chosen race. Despite all their troubles from Abraham, through both testaments, the holocaust and now the troubles with Palestine, the story continues and does have a happy ending. It is a great day at the end of time, a day of salvation, usually symbolised in the Bible by a great banquet feast.

The Great Banquet

So in the time of Jesus, how did they interpret this great banquet feast? For them the final banquet at the end of history, was for Jewish people finding forgiveness and acceptance by God despite the wrongs they have done. They saw themselves sat around the table with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob and all their

heroes of the faith; very much a Jewish party, with celestial bouncers checking names and credentials. If you were not a Jew, there was no salvation for you. You had no place at the table and you would be bounced to another location. The Jews also believed in a dark place of never-ending hopelessness, of sorrow and anger, to which all the Gentiles would be assigned.

This would have certainly been the strongly held opinion by Jesus' fellow Jews including his disciples. Yet there are texts in their Old Testament scriptures which were windows into a much wider acceptance of people by God. In Isaiah (25v6-9), we have his vision of the end times of this final banquet. He prophesies that the Lord Almighty will prepare a banquet for all the nations of the World. This is clearly a universal vision. The prophet sees God preparing the salvation banquet, with invites going out to people from all the nations alongside the Jews. Gentiles will be able to eat at this table. However the Isaiah vision was not the one that stayed upmost in the mind of the Jews, and in later years this Jewish idea of the final banquet was changed. Apocryphal books (such as Enoch – written between the Old and New Testament) and scrolls found from the Qumran communities (about Jesus' times) reject all Gentiles from the messianic banquet and hence salvation. Their names are not down, so they're not coming in! When Jesus was recognised as the Messiah, the new God-king, then he would be seen as coming to establish his throne and rule for the Jews. The view was very firmly that Jesus had come for the Jews and the Jews only. He was Israel's very own, and no-one else's. The disciples of Jesus would have very much believed this to be true. Non-Jews had no place in the kingdom of God.

Invaders

But much worse than the normal non-Jew, was the invader. Since the Old Testament days of Daniel, there had been waves of occupying forces in the land of Israel. These were seen by the Jews as the visible counterpart of Satan's evil forces. There were unseen principalities of darkness that opposed God, and these foreign forces were seen as their manifestations on earth. In short, an enemy soldier was no less than part of the Devil's plan to come against God's people, i.e. against his faith family of the Jewish nation.

In the days of Jesus, Israel had been invaded and annexed into the mighty Roman Empire. The Roman reputation was to ruthlessly put down any challenges to their authority, if necessary by crucifying hundreds at a time. The nearest Roman legion was stationed in Syria. Many troops were also stationed in Fort Antonia in Jerusalem itself, and at Caesarea on the Mediterranean Coast. However there were also garrisons, acting as customs outposts, one of these was in or near Capernaum. It was led by a centurion, (who in practice had 60-80 soldiers, rather than the 100 often assumed).

Capernaum

Since leaving John the Baptist, Jesus had been establishing his own ministry a long way from the Jordan valley, up in the North of the country around the sea of Galilee, and was closely associated with the fishing town of Capernaum. Jesus would have been well known in Capernaum and appears to have made a base there for a while. Peter lived with his mother-in-law there. The other fisherman Andrew, James and John lived there too. The taxes on their days fishing was collected by the unpopular Levi who became the disciple Matthew. He collected taxes for the Romans, and the chief Roman in his area was the centurion.

The Centurion and his servant

The centurions were the back-bone of discipline for the invaders. As much as the locals would have wanted to hate their local Centurion based at the Capernaum garrison, and see him as Satan's agent on earth, they could not. This centurion was different. Perhaps he had initially set out to understand the local people and their customs to help him keep peace in the region. For whatever reason, he had investigated them and their faith. He had fallen in love with the people and respected their God. As a centurion, he was well paid for a soldier. He had financed the building of the local synagogue. However, even on his wages it would have been a significant sacrifice. He was a non-Jew, uncircumcised, but none the less his faith in their God and his love for the Jewish people had won over the Jewish elders of the region.

Soldiers would be in the Roman army for 20 years and not be allowed to marry during that time. However the practice of taking local women (for concubines - a financially beneficial arrangement for the women) would usually be overlooked. Whilst too expensive for common soldiers, the much better paid centurions could afford to have a household entirely made up of servants. This effectively became his family that he could grow very close too. This seems to be the case for this centurion.

One of his male servants had become very ill. He was paralysed and suffering terribly, presumably in great pain. The sickness had reached the stage where he was expected to die shortly. The servant was very dear to him. Some commentators encourage us to believe he had taken a young servant man as a lover, not uncommon in Roman society, but there is no solid evidence to back this theory up. We can assume though that he was very fond of the servant and was distressed at the illness, disturbed enough to try anything that he could to see him healed.

The request for Healing?

It is probable that the Garrison was built a short distance outside of Capernaum. The centurion hears that Jesus is back in town. Luke 7v3 tells us that the Centurion sent some Jewish elders to Jesus to ask him to come and heal the servant. At first this could sound pretentious in that the Centurion felt he was too important to go himself, so sent some-one else. He must have been on very good terms with the Jewish elders to ask them to go, and their response is telling. They did go, but it was not a begrudging act for an authority figure, they begged Jesus earnestly as if for a close friend. Please Jesus, please go to him, we know he is a Roman, but he loves our people, he does so much for us, he even built our synagogue for us. Please, please help him.

This request is extra-ordinary, because we have the Jewish elders, presumably Pharisees here, pleading with their Rabbi, Jesus, to miraculously bless a Gentile. This is at total odds with their faith worldview. The blessings should be for Jews only. Surely they would not have asked this of any other Rabbi, so why Jesus. Had they heard of his recent encounter with the Samaritan woman at the well? The Pharisees were sticklers for laws and rules, particularly purity laws, which they would break by accepting hospitality in a Gentile home. Yet here they are, the Jewish elders, asking their Rabbi to do just that, and enter the home of the Centurion. What's more, the Rabbi actually agrees this and Jesus sets off with the elders to go to his home.

However some Jews would have had a problem with the thought of a Rabbi like Jesus going to his house, due to Jewish laws of cleanliness. As he was not a full convert to Judaism, he would still be seen in many respects as an unclean Gentile, especially in respect to the food in his home. To invite a teacher into such a home, would normally be unacceptable, but because of the extra-ordinary nature of this centurion the community's elders wanted to make an exception and asked Jesus to go. There would have been many Religious people who would have thought it wrong both to ask the Rabbi to go, and for him to go if asked. The cultural mind-set did not cater for a Rabbi wanting to bless a Gentile, and thus places limits on the expectations of Jesus. What are our own expectations of Jesus? What do we limit Jesus to doing because of our lack of expectations, or our lack of faith. I am sure we would be surprised how many times we write Jesus off in a situation when Jesus is willing.

So Jesus sets off from the town out to the garrison. However, the centurion, aware himself of the purity laws, is feeling guilty about asking Jesus to come to his house, and he sends more people out to see Jesus. This time he sends some friends to stop him coming any further. Jesus is nearly there, but is stopped. There is a huddle of conversation whilst some are thinking that it is must be too late and the servant has already died. However there is a new message from the Centurion and it is full of humility.

V6 – “Sir (or Lord), please do not trouble yourself. I do not deserve to have you come into my house, and neither do I consider myself worthy to come to you in person.”

The centurion, this man of authority, the lead official in the whole region, places himself beneath Jesus, and even beneath the Jewish elders when it comes to matters of faith.

[Note: The two versions in Matthew and Luke seem to differ on whether or not the Centurion came to Jesus in person. In Matthew, he came to him, but in Luke some Jewish elders went on his behalf. When we get some-one to do something for us, it can be taken as us doing. You can say I put in a new bathroom suite last month, or you can give the details of where you got it, who delivered it and who installed it. By saying you put it in, does not mean that you carried the bath and sinks in to your house and plumbed them in yourself. So it is probable that Matthew is abbreviating the story and leaving out details that don't serve his purposes. For him, the centurion sending an envoy can be regarded as the same as the centurion going himself. Luke, in his intro, tells us that he has studied matters carefully and written an orderly account, so it is not uncharacteristic of him to put in some extra details – just like we find with his version of the nativity story.]

There is another potential problem though for both Jesus and the centurion by meeting up. He clearly knows of Jesus, but Herod Antipas was on the look out for Jesus, as he had been trying to round up those associated with John the Baptist. It had not been too difficult to keep out of the way of Herod's men, but any soldier who met Jesus would be obliged to arrest him, so a direct meeting with the centurion would have put both Jesus and the centurion in a difficult position. The centurion clearly knew of the whereabouts of Jesus, and had admiration for him, but it was uncertain how like he could keep this knowledge without reporting it. Jesus would have gone, but it is not doubt grateful for the sensitivity of the Centurion in this matter, and not taking any additional unnecessary risks at this stage in his ministry, and we see him leave the area of Capernaum soon after the healing.

A man of authority – command and control

Throughout the gospels we see people amazed and surprised at what Jesus says and does. Almost at every turn some-one is experiencing shock and awe. However in this instance, it is Jesus who is surprised. The words of the centurion make him draw breath in wonder.

v7 “Just give the order, and my servant will get well”.

The centurion sees no reason for the Rabbi to trouble himself, and compromise himself by coming into his home in person. He only, needs to give the order (say the words) and the sickness will leave the servant. An order is useless without the authority to give it, and the power to back it up. He recognises that Jesus has the necessary power and authority over sickness, even one which has brought his servant to the edge of death. The Roman then underlines his understanding of the authority, from his own position and life.

v8 “I too am a man placed under the authority of superior officers and I have soldiers under me. I say ‘Go!’ and he goes, I say ‘Come!’ and he comes, and I order my slave ‘Do this!’ and he does it.

In most industries and commerce we do business by negotiating, and putting in challenges. We often work in teams and promote a positive questioning attitude to our bosses. We will deliberately, come to a consensus, and work out between us what is the best way forward for all concerned. This is true in my own industry which operates the UKs nuclear power stations. Yet if there were to be an incident, the rules change and a much practised command and control structure takes over. In the incident room, the Emergency controller takes charge. He will gather the facts he needs, but he will pass instructions down a chain of command. What is said, is done. This is true also of the emergency services and the armed forces when any major incident occurs. There are individuals, who due to their position and experience, are entrusted to make the right decisions. Orders replace requests. Do this. It is done.

The Centurion was part of a ‘command and control structure’ within the Roman army. He carried out the orders given him by his commander, and in turn his men carried out his orders. If it was said, it was done.

A man of faith

Even with this explanation on 'command and control' given to Jesus, the Rabbi was still taken back with the unquestioning belief in the power of the words of Jesus to heal.

V9 Jesus makes a declaration to the disciples, to the Jewish elders, to the friends of the centurion and to anyone else who has come to see him in Capernaum. " I have never found faith like this not even in Israel"

Jesus singles out this man as having more faith than anyone else he has ever met. True praise indeed.

This is the first time in Matthew and just the second time in Luke that we hear Jesus talk of Faith (the first was for the paralysed man who was lowered through the roof in Luke 5). He uses the word not simply to trust in God, but more specifically to have trust in his teaching as an authentic path to being close to God, and seeing his kingdom come.

The big question here is on how the Centurion came to such a level of faith? Certainly part of it would be his experience of authority. But not just any authority. Jesus was inspirational. The way Jesus taught oozed authority. Before Matthews account of the centurion, we have the 'Sermon on the Mount', and Matthew records that the people were amazed at how he taught, because unlike the teachers of the law, he taught with authority. Perhaps the centurion himself had heard that sermon, or had it retold him by his household. But what else did the Centurion have to raise his faith levels, in addition to the teachings of Jesus and a belief in his authority? There had been the miracles.

The Miracles in Capernaum

From our presumed order of events in the gospels, this incident appears to be fairly early in the three year ministry of Jesus, but Capernaum had already seen more than its fair share of miracles.

One Sabbath when Jesus was teaching in the Centurion funded synagogue, a possessed man screamed out against Jesus, wanting to know if he had come to destroy the demons. Jesus gave an order to the demon. "Be quiet, and come out of the man". The demon threw the man to the floor, then left him. After leaving the synagogue Jesus goes to Peter's house where his mother-in-law has a high fever. This time he speaks directly to the fever, and tells it to leave her. It does immediately, and she gets up and starts to wait on him. There were plenty of other miracles going on in and around Capernaum (such as turning water into wine which happened in nearby Cana). However there was one very special day in Capernaum, when the crowds were packed in close in and around a house where Jesus was teaching – possibly Peter's house again. Those there could sense the healing power of God was present. Some men brought their friend to see Jesus. He was a weak and paralysed man who was probably well known to the community, but they could not get near to Jesus. They got him on the roof, then made a hole so they could lower him down at the feet of Jesus. This time Jesus speaks forgiveness to him (which was seen as blasphemy) but in order to demonstrate his authority, i.e. to forgive, he showed his authority over sickness, and ordered the man himself to get up. Immediately the man's withered body took new healthy shape in front of their eyes, he was healed and he left the building by dancing through the door.

Jesus is demonstrating to Capernaum, that he has authority, and they can see the power and authority in his words. When he speaks, it happens. This gave authority to his teaching – if Jesus is saying this it must be right, because there is truth and power in his words. The Centurion would have understood this, and it helped give him the confidence and belief that Jesus could heal. His servant was paralysed, but Jesus has already demonstrated that he could heal a paralysed man. Yet the possessed man, the feverish mother-in-law and the paralysed man were all healed with Jesus being present and speaking an order directly at the person, demon or sickness. So where did he get the belief that Jesus could heal from a distance?

There is no record of anyone else speaking healing from a distance in the Old Testament or amongst the other Rabbis. It was unique to Jesus, but he had already done it in the region before.

One incident recorded only by John (John 4 v43-54) reports on Jesus healing the dying son of a government official who lived in Capernaum. Again in a town of just 1500, any official would no doubt be well known to the Centurion, perhaps even a friend. The official, whose son, had heard that Jesus was back in the region and had sought him out in nearby Cana. He asked Jesus to go to Capernaum and heal his son who was so ill he was about to die. But Jesus did not want to leave Cana straight away. He told the official "Go, your son will live". The official left Jesus believing, and was met on the way back with the news that his boy was going to live. So here for the first time, we see a Capernaum official's son, healed remotely with a prophetic word. 'Your son will live'.

These supernatural acts would have been big news in the fishing port, and the reputation of Jesus would have caused a real buzz when talked about in any household in and around the town. This was God at work through their Jewish Rabbi, for the Jews. Yet, another, taking it all in would have been the local Centurion. The words of Jesus had authority over sickness, even over a paralysed man close to death, and even when spoken from a distant. He knew this was true, because Jesus had demonstrated this, if not in front of him personally (though it is very likely he was in the synagogue), then to his friends and hired household. He had no reason not to believe in the authority of Jesus. Jesus had proven himself to be true and capable. This is where his belief came from, where his faith came from. Jesus had the authority, and if he willed something to happen, then it would be so. If he made an order, it would be obeyed. His understanding of authority and his experience of the authority of Jesus delivering the goods every time, gave him this faith in the inspirational Rabbi. He had faith because he was in amongst all the Jesus action.

Yet his request was still breaking new ground. The healings witnessed to date in Capernaum had all been to Jews, to those invited to the banqueting table. The blessings were not for Gentiles, especially for a despised occupying force. However both the Centurion and the Jewish elders in Capernaum were confident that Jesus could go an extra step. True, the servant was probably Jewish, but the miracle would bless the Centurion too, as he was suffering at the thought of losing his beloved servant.

A journey of faith for Jesus' followers

The teaching and miracles of Jesus, can never be seen in isolation from his vocation as a Rabbi, with the continual aim and process of teaching his disciples. Each parable and miracles would be discussed and debated at length between them. How does this impact the way that as followers of Jesus they should behave?

There are no parallels in the Old Testament or from other Jewish rabbis of healing at a distance with a spoken word. Only in Jesus, did this happen. So it is worth looking at the healing of the Officials Son, and the Centurion servants alongside another healing that happened from a distance. This occurred shortly afterwards in the borderlands of Syro-Phoenicia, the healing of a Canaanite woman's daughter. She comes to Jesus with her own request, as her daughter is demon possessed and suffering greatly. The mother is at the end of her tether, and wants to be put out of her own misery. The disciples try and stop her getting to Jesus. First she is a woman, and woman should not be bothering a Rabbi, but she is also a foreign woman, one who is a descendant of their most morally despised enemies, the Canaanites. She has the faith that Jesus only needs to say the word and her daughter will be healed. She also has faith that even though he is a Jewish Rabbi, that he would still want to reach out to her a Gentile woman, and have compassion on her by healing her daughter. Once again he is amazed, this time by the faith of this woman. He speaks the word, and the girl who presumably is some distance away in her home, is healed.

These are the three prophetic healings. Jesus is nowhere near the sick person, and yet his word is sufficient. In each case, the healing is brought about by people who believe in the power and authority of Jesus to heal. First to a Jewish authority figure, who believes healing for his son. The second to a Gentile invader, the Roman centurion who believes healing for his servant. Then thirdly, to a foreign woman, crossing both gender and race barriers, who believes healing for her daughter.

Jesus blows apart the firmly held believe that God's blessing was for the Jews only. He comes against the prejudices in the hearts of his Jewish followers including his disciples. They need to know that God is for

all people, because when Jesus is gone, they will be tasked with taking the Good News to the Gentile nations. The faith of the Centurion, and the response of Jesus in healing his servant, is an important part of their understanding about God's kingdom. Isaiah was right, the banquet will be open to all nations. No one is beyond salvation when Jesus (or his Spirit) is in town.

The rise of the Centurion's faith?

So to sum up where the faith of the centurion came from? The centurion must have been familiar enough with the person and works of Jesus, to have believed in his divinity. If he had not seen it first hand then he would have believed through the accounts of those that had, including in his own hired household. He had got to the point where he owned Israel's God as his own, and believed that an unlimited power from God could be released in Jesus. There was a power and an authority which belonged to Jesus, for which he had control over. In his own role, he had Roman power and authority, with men at his disposal to order and obey his wishes. So as such, he could relate well to Jesus. Yet he was also around where the action was, hearing about or even witnessing first hand miracles brought about by the powerful words of Jesus.

Perhaps armed with this knowledge, the Centurion was confident enough in the power of Jesus to heal that he did not have to ask Jesus to come to his house. *He had faith in the authority of the words of Jesus.* He knew if Jesus spoke, then it would be done. He recognised who Jesus was and where his authority came from. Compare this to the Jewish scribes who said his power to heal came from Beelzebub. The centurion knew Jesus was acting under the authority and power of the Jewish God, and could be trusted.

So three key points in the man's faith. He believed in that Jesus had authority from God, and that Jesus was willing to intervene. He believed in the teaching of Jesus, and heard authority in his words. Finally he was witness (directly or indirectly) to the miracles that Jesus brought about by speaking with this authority.

Is Faith essential?

Having seen the importance of this miracle to the Jewish followers of Jesus, we now have to ask what it can teach us today about faith in the 21st century.

The healings from a distance seem to all be accompanied by great belief or great faith, but couldn't Jesus have done the healings without any shows of great faith. There is no evidence that the sick people had faith in these cases, or in that of the paralytic man, but relied on the faith of others. However some of those who were healed by Jesus did have their own faith, such as the haemorrhaging woman that touched Jesus's cloak and was instantly healed. However there are those like the Gadarene Demoniac who Jesus cast the demons out of into a herd of pigs. He didn't come with any faith, or with anyone to have faith on his behalf. It seems in this case he is reliant on the touch and faith of Jesus himself to administer God's power to him. You could argue that there is always some faith involved somewhere. That is until you look into the Old Testament at a strange tale in 2 Kings 13v20-21 which reads:- 'Elisha died and was buried. Each year bands of Moabite raiders used to invade Israel. Once this happened during a funeral. The people threw the corpse into Elisha's tomb and ran off. As soon as the body came into contact with Elisha's bones, the man came back to life and stood up!' Wow!. So in this case which of the two dead men had the faith for the miracle?!

I do not think that Jesus always **needs** our faith, but he **wants** it. He wants you to believe in him, and all the great things that he could do in you and through you. He wants you to partner with him in his work. Could he still do great stuff without you. Of course, but he chooses to involve you, and a lot of things won't happen unless we do get engaged with him, believe in him, and sometimes step out in faith beyond our comfort zone. We will not see much happening in our own lives and in our own Church if we are not inspired by Jesus. Is your faith level, your expectations in what he can do for you and the Church here, at the level you want them to be at? If you are content with them, then you are probably in the wrong place. Jesus is capable of doing far more for you than you honestly believe he can.

Increasing your faith

If you have a mirror in your handbag, or a reflective surface, can you get it out now. Have a look at yourself. If you've not got a mirror, picture yourself in your mind's eye. Where is your faith level at? What

do you believe that Jesus can do in you and through you, now? Is that enough for you – where do you want to be? What would you like to believe in and see happen in your life and the life of your friends and families. Jesus is willing.

Now look around you. Have a good look. Who can you see? Who is not in Church that you wish was here week on week? What is the faith level of this Church? Are you where you want to be? Can you believe for more? Jesus is willing.

But how **do** we believe in more. In other words how do we increase our faith levels.

The Centurion focussed on Jesus, he gave of himself sacrificially (i.e. in building the synagogue). Consecrating some new part of your life to Jesus, is a good place to start in building your faith. What can I give over, perhaps involving time or money, that I have so far kept to myself. If we want to build our faith, we can start by building our commitment.

The Centurion also witnessed or listened to testimonies of the great works and miracles that Jesus was doing. He was up to date on what Jesus was saying and doing. He let the works and words of Jesus permeate his thoughts, his attitudes, his aspirations and his vision for the future. He believed that all things were possible in Jesus. All these things exercised his faith, and gave him the confidence to step out in faith himself by asking for Jesus to heal his servant, and fully believe that his word was enough. We need to love the Bible, fill our minds with the scriptures, with the words of Jesus. Then as we use these in our prayers it will activate our faith.

I think Faith is like a muscle that we need to exercise, by giving of ourselves to God, and by experiencing more of what he is doing in this world (first hand or by testimony). When I was growing up in Cheddar as a teenager, I worked out. I would take my shirt off, stand in front of my parents dressing table mirror, and use my Dads bullworker. I would work out at school with medicine balls, and I would go running and play sport. I exercised every day. I didn't use my asthma as an excuse for not doing it. I had hard biceps, a big chest and a flat stomach. Nearly 40 years on, I am overweight, weak and flabby with high cholesterol. Why? Because I stopped exercising those muscles. I gave up. Lots of excuses, but my lack of physical prowess now is a result of the decisions I made.

In contrast, I have been exercising my faith muscles, or at least a bit more than I was. I have been reading about miraculous ministries and where practical I have been going to places where miracles have been happening, so I can either witness them myself or at least hear first hand from those who have experienced miracles. I am not thrill seeking for my own amusement, but I am trying to increase my belief in what God can do through others, then see if he can do it through me too. I want to be inspired by Jesus and what he is doing. I want more of his presence, I want him to use me more than he is.

Is it working? I think so. As I have seen and heard of more miracles and other answered prayers, it has given me more confidence to step out in faith and pray for others, and see results. It makes me bolder in what I ask for of Jesus, and it gives me greater faith that my prayers will be answered. It is true of course, then many of my prayers are not answered, especially this year the really big ones against Cancer, Cystic Fibrosis and other terrible diseases. Non answered prayers do knock my faith a little, and sometimes dent my enthusiasm but never enough to not try again. I am determined to push through, because my faith is inspired by Jesus, both by his past and his present. The same power that healed the Centurion's paralysed near-death servant, is available to heal and restore today through his Holy Spirit. I know that through him all things are possible, and when I see a direct answer to pray my faith rises again to a new level.

There came a point when my Church friends and I, encouraged by the miracles we experienced elsewhere, started offering prayers after our own Church services. The first times we did this, we prayed for a young man who had had severe tendonitis in his arm, for several months. It was in a sling. As we prayed we knew God was doing something in his arm, and I had a vision of heat running through it. By the next day it was totally healed to all our surprise, not least his.

Part of the success in seeing answers to prayers has been working and praying alongside others than want to increase their faith, and avoiding the negative vibes of those who think it's all rubbish. If you want your faith grow, then spend time talking, praying and ministering with those whose faith matches or exceeds yours. Let Jesus inspire you, ask him to inspire you, ask him to increase your faith.

A leap of faith

Indiana Jones in the Last Crusade, believes there is a path across this ravine, but he can not see one. His research tells him it's there. His instinct tells him it is there. He is a man of experience who has taken calculated risks before and survived. He is with others who encourage him to do it. They have faith too. However it is not until he steps off the side into the ravine that the invisible path appears. It has to take a step into the unknown, a leap of faith.

When his beloved servant was ill, the Centurion showed his hand, stepped into the unknown, armed just with his belief in the authority of Jesus, and declared that Jesus need only say the words and his servant would be healed. As he stepped out with this bold declaration, took this leap of faith that amazed Jesus, then the path to healing miraculously appeared. Jesus was willing.

Your future is unwritten, your level of faith is probably not where you want it to be today, but be inspired by Jesus. He is willing. All things are possible through him. Exercise your faith muscle in any ways that you can, and trust him, step out in faith, with that prayer, that word of encouragement, that invite. Don't expect Jesus to do it alone, that's not how he prefers to work, don't rely on others either. He wants you to join in on the fun, get stuck in and enjoy the blessings. He wants **you** (each one of you) both individually and as a Church to step out in faith and take a risk. Go on – Jesus is willing. Amen.