All Saints St Andrews 2nd June 2013

Jesus responds to the centurion who asks him to heal his servant. The request is unexpected. The testimonial from the Jewish elders is unexpected. The centurion’s faith is unexpected, particularly to Jesus – ‘not even in Israel have I found such faith’ – particularly unexpected because his concept of authority allows him to believe that Jesus can heal at a distance.

So this is a story of surprises. The centurion was an officer of the occupying power. It is a surprise to be told that he is capable of doing good. And it is a surprise to find Jesus responding so readily to his request for healing for his servant – a surprise to find God in Christ turning up in the unexpected setting.

So what are we to make of this story?

First I think it reminds us that we should never set limits on what we might regard as proper places and circumstances in which God may act. Archbishop Rowan Williams used to say that our function is to find out what God is doing and to join in. We may be surprised where and with whom God works.

Secondly I think that we should always recognise the quality and the faith in people who do not conform to the norms of faith. There was a bit of surprise and disturbance when Pope Francis said this week: *‘Pope Francis told listeners: "The Lord has redeemed all of us, all of us, with the blood of Christ: all of us, not just Catholics. Everyone! 'Father, the atheists?' Even the atheists. Everyone!"* This is what happens when people preach unscripted homilies. There was a swift corrective, *‘"Pope Francis has no intention of provoking a theological debate on the nature of salvation through his homily", and going on to explain "they cannot be saved who, knowing the church as founded by Christ and necessary for salvation, would refuse to enter her or remain in her".*

I think this is important – not so much for what it says or doesn’t say about universalism. It’s important because it tells us something important about the future mission of the church. At our General Synod this coming week, I’ll be talking about our membership statistics. Our church on some measurements has declined 15% in 5 years – although the most recent year’s figures suggest that that decline has very much slowed down. The figures are based on Membership, Communicants and Attendance – and of course the problem is that those measurements don’t capture our growing engagement with people outside and beyond formal membership of the church. It doesn’t measure non-eucharistic services or the sort of prayer and talking groups which are becoming common. Nor does it measure the kind of ‘half way house’ activity which brings people in some way into the fellowship of the church without expecting them to make a formal commitment.

And that is the future of the church. I see a note about your Congregational Workshop in your Pew Leaflet. I hope you will make that a priority. It’s a time for meeting together and giving your congregation a new direction in mission. And that means that we cannot carry on doing only the formal institutional things which we do – we have to find new points at which we can meet with all sorts of people of goodwill. And some of them will come to faith.

There is a problem about that which you will well understand. It is about an institutional model of the church set alongside a more flexible and open model. But it is the institutional model which pays the stipend of the priest and sustains the building.

I think that this is where the future lies – Art and Soul – Life Events – for example. Places of meeting in which the faith which resides deep in unexpected people can meet the God who turns up in unexpected places.