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THE FAITH OF THE CENTURION
 OF CAPERNAUM.

by Archbishop Nikon of
 Washington and Florida

"Amen, I tell you, many will come from east and west and sit at table with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in the Kingdom of Heaven, while the sons and heirs of the kingdom will be driven out into the outer darkness...Then Jesus said to the centurion, 'Go; it shall be done as you have believed...'. " (Mt.8:11-13).

This warning of the Lord, spoken to the people of His own time, relates in full measure to us as well. For, we too, born of Orthodox parents, baptized in Christ's faith and belonging to the Holy Orthodox Church, are children of the kingdom and yet each one of us is in danger of being banished into the outer darkness in the future age insomuch as we do not follow after the Lord in this life.

Thus, for us, if we desire to avoid this danger and to inherit the kingdom of eternal blessedness and rejoice in the Lord's undimming glory, it is very important to understand the circumstances under which the Lord spoke this warning; and why the faith of the centurion of Capernaum was deemed worthy of the Lord's special praise.

The Lord Jesus Christ covered His all-mighty Divinity with the appearance of a humble man and experienced many sorrows in the days of His earthly preaching. The affliction of His crown of thorns and the torments of His cross began from the first day of His preaching, with His first encounter with a world lying in evil. The moment He proclaimed in Nazereth, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon Me, because He hath anointed Me to preach the gospel to the poor; He hath sent Me to heal the brokenhearted, to preach deliverance to the captives and healing to the blind, to set at liberty them that are bruised, to preach the acceptable year of the Lord...This day is this scripture fulfilled in your ears."¹, they tried to kill Him and the anger of His enemies followed Him at every step of His divine preaching. He was deprived even of the understanding of His disciples. For, though they were personally devoted to Him, they did not understand His teaching until after the descent of the Holy Spirit upon them after His ascension to heaven from them. Thus He fulfilled His earthly preaching with great struggle, and sorrowfully exclaimed, "O faithless and perverse generation, how long shall I be with you? How long shall I endure you?"².

Only occasionally, as if cutting through the darkness into which mankind was plunged, bright rays of that faith which the Saviour had come to plant, warmed His sorrowful heart. Such a bright ray was the faith of the centurion of Capernaum.

At that time the Israelite government had lost its political independence and was subjugated by the powerful Roman Empire. The policy of the Roman Empire concerning subjugated peoples was to offer these peoples full autonomy, provided they paid tributes and did not rise in rebellion against the Empire. In order to guarantee Roman interests, military garrisons were posted in the cities of the sub-

jugated kingdoms.

In comparison with the immensity of the Roman Empire, these garrisons were very insignificant in size; but they were distinguished by very strict discipline and severe cruelty. The commanders of these garrisons had total authority over the city and the people.

Judging by the Gospel narration, the Capernaum centurion was a pagan, but he had a soul which was generally inclined to Christ. The soul of this pagan was filled with love toward God, which was revealed in his love toward God's people — he had built a synagogue for them —, and by his love toward his neighbour — revealed in his persistent care for his dying servant.

It is evident that the centurion was a senior, perhaps the senior, commander in Capernaum, for archeological excavations testify that the synagogue he had built was very large. A lesser official could not have built such a large prayer home for a foreign faith. The Lord Jesus Christ who had preached in Capernaum, appeared, on the other hand, to be a simple migrant from Nazareth, a carpenter occupying no office and having no official social position.

And here this commander, instead of calling the Judean Teacher to himself, appealed to Him with reverence and fear, through the intermediary of His own people of the same tribe. He asked the Israelite elders to intercede for him before their Teacher, not considering himself worthy to appeal to Him personally. Moreover, when he discovered that the Teacher was ready to come to his home, he asked that He be stopped. Here the centurion reveals his faith and the nobility of his soul. In his words, recorded by the holy Evangelist Luke, this thought is revealed:

"I cannot receive You, the Messiah sent for the chosen people, in my home, because I am a pagan. I know that the law of Your people forbids Your people intercourse with pagans. If you enter my home, then You will be reproached by Your people. Indeed, there is no need for You to enter my home and see the ill servant in order that my request be fulfilled. This would be necessary for an ordinary doctor. You have limitless authority and command all laws of existence. It is enough for you to but say a word and it will immediately be fulfilled, because you are the Master and Commander of both heaven and earth. I myself have an understanding of authority, because I possess authority over my subordinates and they fulfil my orders without question. The entire universe is subject to You. From acquaintance with Your people and with the law of Your people, I discovered that the Messiah, whose arrival is awaited by the whole world will be the almighty God incarnate. From Your activity in this city, I have been convinced that You are God incarnate on earth. Therefore, only speak the word and it will heal my servant."

The centurion of Capernaum was like the Magi who had come from the East to reverence the Saviour of the world Who had been born in Bethlehem; he was like the Syro-Chaldean woman about whom the Lord declared, "O woman, great is your faith."³; he was like Augar, the King of Edessa, who wished to deliver Christ the Saviour from crucifixion on Golgotha and was deemed worthy to receive from the Lord the ikon not made by hands, and a miraculous healing.

3. Mt.15:28

SYNAXIS

These were all pagans, but they testified that Christ the Saviour is the "Light to enlighten the gentiles", as St. Simeon the God-receiver had foretold of Him, and that faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour of the world is near to each God-fearing human heart not darkened by malice, pride and passions.

(The message which Vladika Nikon is giving us is very simple and extremely significant: If you were "born Orthodox" you are fortunate. But many were also born into the old Israel, and were not saved. They hoped on some sort of birth-right to provide them with the Promise, but did not accept the Promise when it came to them. They were replaced then by a new Israel — new "sons-of-Abraham" were called forth to fill Christ's Church from amongst the gentiles.

Those exclusivists today who hope on salvation as an automatic right of their carnal birth are directly warned here by Vladika Nikon that converts are entering the Holy Orthodox Church who far outshine them in faith and thus they have nothing to be proud of in their carnal birth of Orthodox parents. They, too, must become converts to Holy Orthodoxy — to Christ, for Orthodoxy and Christ are one and the same thing).

THE SPIRITUAL MEADOW

by John Moskhas

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The Hermit Barnabas

The hermit, Fr. Barnabas, lived in one of the caves by the sacred Jordan. Once when he had set out for the river to quench his thirst, he stepped on a pointed stick and it entered his foot. Fr. Barnabas did not bother to remove the stick or see a doctor about it and the foot began to fester so badly that he was compelled to go to the Bashen Lavra (the "Lavra of the Towers") and take a cell there.

Meanwhile, the sore grew worse from day to day, and the elder told everyone who visited him, "The more the external person suffers, the more the inner person grows in strength."

Sometime passed after Fr. Barnabas had left his cave and another hermit came to the cave to live in it. When he entered it, he saw an angel of God standing before the holy table in the chapel which had been consecrated by abba Barnabas. The terrified monk asked the angel:

"Why are you here?"

"I am the Lord's angel," he replied, "and this holy table has been entrusted to my care ever since it was consecrated."

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