

“Lord, I Am Not Worthy . . .”

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Few Gospel accounts are as powerful as the story of the Roman Centurion who has heard of Jesus and his great deeds. The Centurion seeks out Jesus to help him, for his servant is paralyzed and suffering. Of course, Jesus agrees and offers to come to the Centurion’s home to cure the servant. In faith, the Centurion utters these powerful words: “Lord, I am not worthy to have you come under my roof; but only speak the word, and my servant will be healed” (Matthew 8:8, NRSV; see also Luke 7:6).

This is, truly, a story of faith. Recall, that the Centurion is a Roman—a Gentile—one who would be considered ineligible for the promises that the Lord had made to his Chosen People, Israel. Yet he had faith that Jesus could heal his servant. He even called Jesus “Lord.” Because of this, Jesus was willing to go to his house—an act that would have been forbidden and would, according to Jewish standards, made Jesus unclean. Yet Jesus was willing to do this. In the end, this story is as much about the faith of the Centurion as it is a story of the ends to which Jesus will go to bring health, wholeness, and salvation.

Is it any wonder, then, that the Church puts the words of the Centurion on the mouth of every member of the liturgical assembly as we too prepare to receive health, wholeness, and salvation through the gift of the Eucharist? With the implementation of the English translation of the third edition of *The Roman Missal*, this full statement of the Centurion will be our response to the invitation to Holy Communion: “Behold the Lamb of God, / behold him who takes away the sins of the world. / Blessed are those called to the supper of the Lamb.”

It is no accident that *these* words, in *this* exchange, should take place at *this* point of the Mass. Look at what is happening: we are being invited to “behold” the Lord, as he is present in the Eucharist. Not simply to “look,” not simply to “notice.” We are to “behold” him—to see him, with the eyes of faith, and to see what he is doing for us in this liturgy. He is preparing to feed us with his very body and blood!

This makes the most sense if we look closer at the Gospel accounts and the story of the Centurion, particularly from the Gospel according to Matthew (it is also recounted in Luke),



for it is only in the Matthean account that Jesus replies to the Centurion “many will come from the east and the west, *and will eat with Abraham and Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven* [emphasis added] . . . Go; let it be done for you according to your faith” (Matthew 8:11, 13, NRSV).

Now look again at the liturgical exchange at this point in the Eucharist. We are invited to “Behold the Lamb of God.” The invitation references the vision of the book of Revelation (19:9, NRSV), where the angel says to Saint John, “Write this: Blessed are those who are invited to the marriage supper of the Lamb.” The wedding feast of the Lamb, and the “banquet in the kingdom of heaven,” that Jesus references in Matthew (see

above) *are the same great banquet!* And we are being *invited* to that banquet, at this moment in the liturgy!

Surely, there are no better words with which to respond to this invitation—“Lord, I am not worthy / that you should enter under my roof, / but only say the word / and my soul shall be healed.” The liturgy invites us, at this moment, to the same faith, to the same conviction, as that of the Centurion belief in what Jesus can do. Then, as the Centurion was assured presence at the great banquet of heaven, so too might we be admitted to that same banquet, *here*, in this Eucharist! If there was hope for him, then surely there is hope for us, too!

Notice that in the revised translation of this exchange, the emphasis is *not* on our unworthiness. Truly, in fact, *none* of us is worthy of so great a gift as the Eucharist. And that’s the point! It is not our merit that admits us to this great banquet. Rather, it is our faith in Jesus Christ—the same faith as that of the Centurion! God’s grace given in the sacrament of the Eucharist is free gift. We need only respond and accept this gift.

The full response of the Centurion helps us to recognize that Christ’s promise of health, wholeness, and salvation is ours if we accept the invitation. That promise is fulfilled in the Eucharist, in Holy Communion which we are about to receive!

“Blessed are those called to the supper of the Lamb!”