

Sermon for the Twenty-first Sunday after Trinity, October 16, 2016, at 10:30 a.m. at the Cathedral Church of the Epiphany, Columbia, SC. Text: John 4: 46-54, “thy son liveth.”

As descendants of the Anglo-Saxon-Celtic ethos, we get a heavy dose of the Church as the family of God, the household of faith. Continental Catholicism tends to emphasize the Church as the army of God. Christians are the soldiers of Christ, the *militia Christi*. The Jesuits in Europe were founded by a soldier, St. Ignatius of Loyola. Today we have both emphases in our propers. The Epistle deals with spiritual combat and being strong in the Lord. The Gospel portrays something familial: a nobleman who cares enough about his very sick son to ask for Jesus’ help. The father has a robust faith and is persistent in prayer. Jesus healing of this boy is the second miracle, or sign, in John’s Gospel. John gives us 7 signs, or miracles, the first one being the wedding at Cana, then today’s Gospel is the 2nd. It is worthwhile working out at home what the other 5 are. Each sign shows Jesus’ glory as the Savior of the world. He is the Saviour of all men, Jews, Samaritans, Gentiles, everyone.

In John, chapter 4, verse 46, Jesus returns from Jerusalem to Galilee, going south-to-north, to Cana, where he turned the water into wine. There is in Cana a certain nobleman, a Gentile military officer, a royal official of high standing in the court of Herod Antipas. The officer’s son is sick at Capernaum, 18 miles away. The officer has heard about Jesus and his miracles.

In chapter 4, verse 47, this Gentile officer comes to Cana, to the village carpenter of Nazareth, at about one in the afternoon, the 7th hour, to ask Jesus whether he will walk the 18 miles to Capernaum to heal his son. There may be some pride the officer has to swallow in making this request. But he doesn’t care what anyone will say. He is strong in the Lord. He brings his need to Christ.

Verse 48: “Except ye see signs and wonders, ye will not believe.” Jesus seems to put the officer down, in the midst of a crowd. “Do you base your faith on signs?” “Are you sensation seekers, agape at the signs you have seen?” “Can you see who I really am?” In John’s Gospel, we are supposed to see through the signs to belief in Jesus as God. “Do you come in earnest?”

Verse 49: The officer’s motives are pure; he desires life for his son, not a display. So he persists. He knows he is asking a lot — to bring the Lord 18 miles to his house. But he persists. He is strong in the Lord, and his son is dying. Jesus’ remark about signs and wonders makes the officer realize that he’s probably hanging on a cliff by his fingernails, but he persists. He refuses to be discouraged. Why did Jesus answer him in a seeming rebuke? To make sure he was in earnest — to intensify his desire — to deepen his faith

— to lead him to deeper faith in what the sign would tell him about Jesus. Faith, not in the sign, but in the Lord, and what kind of Lord we have.

When our Lord seems to back off, we are to persist in prayer. He wants to deepen our faith and bring us to wholehearted prayer, so that we can discover His promises on persistence in prayer. So let us bring Him all our needs, with thanksgivings for His power, love and providence, and give Him permission to act on our requests in the way He knows best. Let us triumphantly use the sacraments to overcome sin and anxiety and be built up in Him. He will help us every minute of the day, in the heat of spiritual warfare. He will equip us for every spiritual battle, with defensive and offensive weaponry. He will help us to clear away the obstacles we place in the way of being in love with Him.

Verse 50: “Go thy way, thy son liveth.” Jesus says, “I will not go with you. You go back home, and your son will be alive.” “And the man believed the word that Jesus had spoken unto him, and he went his way.” The father had 18 miles of road ahead of him, yet he believed that Jesus could heal his son from this distance. Here is the life-giving word of Jesus, our rescue from death to life. Jesus can do this because His anointing in the Holy Spirit is 100%. The father goes his way without further anxiety or even hurry. There have been times when you took your problem to God and prayed it through, and found tremendous peace and strength.

Verses 51-53: the father’s servants meet him on the way back to Capernaum. They report that his son is now alive. He asks them when he came back to life, and the servants say that it was the same moment when Jesus said, “Thy son liveth.” The father and his household are now believers in Jesus as Lord and God.

What will we do differently after our meeting with Jesus? What are you looking forward to, after He raises you up from your trouble, and makes you strong in Him?

One man’s response is “to be a channel through which the power of God flows into our society.” Another man says: “I’m looking for a lot of wonderful days, for some years ago, I accepted Jesus Christ, and I’ve had wonderful days ever since.” One woman says, “I’m looking for more time to do simple kindnesses for people, because I’ve found that the greatest happiness in the world is in giving something to someone else.”

Turn worries, upsets and tensions over to God. One doctor’s advice is: “Keep life simple, learn to like work. Make the present moment a success. Always be planning something. Say ‘nuts’ to irritations. Turn the defeat of adversity into victory.”

You will tend to get what you are looking for. Be careful what you look for...you're likely to get it. That which we deeply expect tends to come to us. Come to Jesus with prayer for your troubles, the troubles of your family, friends and neighbors. His promises are staggering. His promises regarding our capacities are staggering. There are enough spiritual resources in this congregation right here to stand this whole region on its ear for Christ. Think what a small piece of uranium can do...propel a nuclear submarine underwater for months.

Sometimes He wants to answer our requests and He knocks on the door of our hearts and finds it locked, because we never imagined anything would result. Ask for things the way Solomon did, for things you know He wants you to have...like deeper repentance, or greater wisdom, or more love for Him and for others, or the grace to see a challenge as an opportunity to serve Him. He answers those prayers very quickly, and supplies all your need.

The Gentile army officer came to see that the carpenter of Nazareth is the Anointed One of God, the Messiah, the Christ, the Son of the living God. The healing of his son is a sign for the whole world of the eternal life that Jesus will give after His Resurrection.

The officer was ready, and surrendered to an answer that may have taken him by surprise or looked different from what he expected. The Lord's answer may be so big and so much more than we ask for that we don't even recognize it. For example, the answer may be that He comes to walk with us in the midst of the burning fiery furnace. His answer is the assurance of His presence in time of trial. He is Himself, in His Person, in His communion with us in the Holy Spirit, the answer. Communion with God is the ultimate answer, the ultimate glory. That is what Job discovered.

He is Master of the impossible, and the way forward into new life may look quite different from what we imagined. The way forward may look impossible or seem degrading or hopeless, as though our Lord had not taken us seriously or was being off-handed with us. The way forward will always take us through the Cross, where all our hopes and pre-conceived notions and cherished dreams are shattered, all because they are too narrow. The way forward looks different from what we had imagined, because it is at once so much grander, and so much more simple. Amen.

