

the Centurion's "servant"

REV. TOM HORNER

"...this particular expression of love was simply there, as most likely in Matthew's story of 'The Centurion's Boy'—or better, 'The One Whom the Centurion Loved.' And it was no sin that he loved him."

The Gospel story that is widely known as the Healing of the Centurion's Servant is literally the healing of the Centurion's Boy, and we should be grateful that at least two recent versions (one ecumenical and one Catholic) have called this to our attention. In *The New English Bible's* translation of Matthew 8:5-13 all the words that we have become accustomed to think of as "servant" in this story are correctly rendered "boy," while in *The New American Bible* the initial expression is translated "my serving boy" and elsewhere simply "boy." The original Greek here has only *pais* throughout, and *pais* of course means "boy," although it may mean "attendant" or "servant" in some contexts. It is Luke 7:1-10, however, that introduces *doulos*, "slave," into the story, which for nineteen hundred years has caused readers to conjure up images of the faithful old retainer who was ill. But it has always seemed to me that it was more than an ordinary concern that this centurion has for this individual—certainly more than that generally shown to slaves.

My first thought on the matter was that Luke, being of a Hellenistic background and knowing how the expression *ho pais mou*, "my boy," might sound to his Greek readers, three times deliberately interposed the word "slave" in his recounting of the story. "My boy" is an expression that an older man in the Greek world might have used to refer to his younger friend—or lover. In writers who span the period from the heyday of ancient Greece to the second Christian century *pais*, "boy," is used to refer to the younger lover of an older man (e.g., in Plato, *Phaedrus* 237B and Plutarch, *Life of Lycurgus* 18:4). Plutarch once uses *paides* (the plural) to refer to "boys" who were also "slaves" and who, incidentally, were also available for homosexual purposes (*Life of Alexander* 22:1). The word is translated, however, simply "boys." But Luke here, though he three times changes "boy" to "slave," has still a fourth reference in which he gives himself away when he too uses *ho pais mou*: "But speak a word only and my boy will be healed" (7:7). He could not very well have avoided using the original wording here. By this time it had become a fixed part of the tradition that both he and Matthew were using.

We must look, however, beyond Luke's Greek background as a possible reason for the change and it might be found, I think, in his total theological outlook: he is writing the Gospel for the oppressed. Not necessarily those who indulged in homosexuality, but more especially it was women, slaves, Samaritans, and the poor who are emphasized as the oppressed in Luke's Gospel. These are the ones who for him are the prime objects of Jesus' concern, and anytime he can

emphasize the presence of a slave he is going to do so. (Even with Matthew's reading, however, don't think of the "boy" as a child. The context here does not indicate that. The word is often used in Greek, Ancient and Modern, to refer to a young man. *Paidia*, the plural in Modern Greek, can refer to young men in their twenties.)

Actually Luke's main purpose is to show the gradual unfolding of the Christian revelation to all people. So, in the Book of Acts, which he also wrote, he has next after the establishment of the Church in Jerusalem, the reception of the Gospel by the Samaritans, who were really schismatic Jews; then, to the Ethiopian eunuch, who was most likely a black Jew—yes, Jewish because otherwise he would not have traveled up to Jerusalem to worship and of course black because of the ethnic designation. He was also most likely "gay" because eunuchs usually were; no other sexual option, except that of no sex at all, was open to them. Next in Acts, there is the conversion of Paul from Pharisaic Judaism, the most difficult of all groups from which to win converts. Lastly, climaxing the first half of Acts (in chapter 10), there is the baptism of Cornelius the centurion, of the Italian cohort in Caesarea. For Luke, it is this centurion who is the first Gentile convert, and one from the hated oppressor class at that! (It would be interesting to speculate that this was the same centurion as that of the earlier healing story or even the one at the cross—where Luke does not yet allow a Christian declaration—but no such identifications could be proved.)

Luke's Gospel to all humankind, therefore, must take in the hated Roman centurion, as well as women, slaves, Samaritans, eunuchs, and the poor. Does this include the "gay" minority? Indeed it does, although Luke did not want to highlight that. He had rather emphasize that the young man who was the object of the centurion's concern was a slave. None of the Gospel writers calls attention to homosexuality in any way. On the other hand, it cannot be proved that the work of the Four Evangelists (including Acts) suppresses all evidence of it. What we do know is that they never make it an area of prime concern—and neither should we. Always primary was faith. But just as today, this particular expression of love was simply there, as most likely in Matthew's story of "The Centurion's Boy"—or better, "The One Whom the Centurion Loved." And it was no sin that he loved him. As Louie Crew has written: "The sin is not that I love another man, but that too often I do not love him enough, i.e., as much as I love myself" (*Insight*, Winter 1978, p. 17). The centurion did love—and his words to Jesus prove it. At Catholic Masses, before receiving Communion, all worshipers recite an adaptation of his very words in Matthew 8:8—"Lord, I am not worthy to receive you, but only say the word and I shall be healed." Would that we—and all worshipers—could know more about the original use of these words and their meaning for us today.