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Meditation on Matthew 8:5-11

Probably everyone has had this experience at some point. You are on your way somewhere, still have a few things to do, perhaps you have an appointment, and your head is full of other thoughts. You may have to fight your way through large crowds of people before you get to where you want to go. And then it happens. You don't notice that someone is talking to you, even though it might be an acquaintance, a friend, or someone you actually know well. You are too focused on yourself, too absorbed in your own thoughts and entangled in your own plans. How embarrassing when you realise this afterwards! It becomes more than embarrassing, even shameful, in cases where you have to admit afterwards: I did recognise and notice the other person, but I simply found him or her annoying and pretended not to notice. That is anything but friendly, attentive, compassionate or respectful.

Jesus shows us a completely different behaviour in today's Gospel. Jesus is approached by the centurion, who describes the terrible situation of his servant, and Jesus reacts immediately and directly. No ifs or buts. No excuses, no evasions, no long-winded talk. The centurion does not even have to formulate a specific request; Jesus knows what to do. He says briefly and concisely, 'I will come and heal him.'

Those affected by sexual abuse would also like to have an experience like the one the centurion has with Jesus in today's Gospel – especially when they turn to representatives of the Church to talk about their distress, their pain, their desire for justice. However, they often experience exactly the opposite. They are not listened to; attempts are made to silence them through pressure or money, they are not believed, their experiences are trivialised, the investigation of the experiences they describe is delayed, and they may even be blamed and made to appear like liars. When victims are treated in this way by the Church, it is, in a sense, tantamount to renewed abuse. One only has to imagine it in concrete terms. Victims turn to representatives of the Church, who claim and assert that they are special followers of Jesus Christ, on behalf of themselves and their institution. The victims trust in the words of the Church representatives, whether they are lay people, priests or bishops: they trust in their moral authority just as the centurion in today's Gospel trusted in the authority of Jesus (cf. 'but only say the word'; Matthew 8:8) and they do so, in some cases, with particular intensity (cf. 'with no one have I found such faith'; Matthew 8:10). And then this breach of trust.

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All this makes one thing very clear to us. If we do not want to be guilty ourselves towards those affected by abuse, then we must turn consistently to the one we claim to follow, Jesus Christ. Just as he turned to the centurion in the Gospel, so should we turn to those affected by abuse. This is only possible if we open our hearts, senses, and minds wide and act accordingly. In concrete terms, this can mean the following, among other things:

- I respond to people as they approach me. I do not impose any preconditions on victims if they want to talk to me. Formalities, expressions of respect or similar gestures towards me are not important. Talking to victims is important to me, even if communication with them can be difficult due to their experiences, because the pain, anger and grief run so deep.
- I am ready to show compassion. For me, victims are not simply a 'case' that has to be dealt with formally. I perceive the whole person and their life.
- I am reliable, clear and transparent in my communication. I do not allow myself to be deterred by the conflicts and stressful situations that can arise in connection with the investigation and processing of abuse.
- I speak with victims of abuse on an equal footing. Like me, they are part of the Church, part of the body of Christ, of which it is said that when one part suffers, the whole body suffers (cf. 1 Cor 12:26).

Prayer

Lord, our God, as human beings, we often find it difficult to face the darker and more challenging aspects of life. We often look only at ourselves and forget our neighbours. Give us the strength, courage and perseverance to be there for those who need our help and solidarity. Grant us the compassion necessary to recognise what is needed; the creativity needed to find solutions; and the understanding and reason needed to contribute to justice.

Question

When victims of abuse contact me, how open, compassionate, focused and reliable am I really in what I say and do?

What promotes such an attitude, what makes it difficult?

