**BROOKS BY THE TRAVELLER'S WAY - ADDRESSES BY JOHN H. JOWETT**

**24. OVERFLOWING SYMPATHIES by JOHN H. JOWETT**

*"A certain centurion."*

*Luke 7:2*

What are my anticipations respecting the character of this Centurion? He is an educated Roman, and therefore I anticipate that he will be unsentimental, severely secular, crushing out all inclinations to the mystical. He is a Roman soldier, and therefore I anticipate that he may be proud, domineering, hard, and unsympathetic. He is a Roman slave-owner, and therefore I anticipate that he may be self-centred, supercilious, inconsiderate, and brutal. My anticipations do not shape for me a rich and enticing personality. He is a man living in the steely glare of imperial power, and I expect to find him power-benumbed, and absorbed in the hardening materialism of the fleeting day. He will be as a land of drought and barrenness, sandy, gritty, rasping, and unkindly. Instead of all which, he stands revealed to us as a land of springs, musical with streams, robed in soft and tender graces, and abounding in grateful shades. The soldier is delicately sensitive. The slave-owner is gentle and sympathetic. The educated Roman is reverent and worshipful. I expected stern and barren heights, and lo! grass is growing upon the mountains; imperial power is associated with tenderest grace. I want to dwell for a little time near this commanding personality, and rehearse some of its unexpected wealth.

Here are rivers of rich and generous sympathy. I know their depth and fulness by the barriers they overleap. Sympathy is commonly confined within severer conventional limits. It is often like a lake in a private park, and not like the stream which weds together the private park and the village green. It is often the dialect of the hamlet rather than the speech of a people. It is parochial rather than national, sectarian instead of universal. There are stern, hoary walls within which its movements are enclosed, and beyond the enclosures the music of its influence is never heard. But sometimes the waters rise in a gracious flood; the imprisoning walls are submerged; the boundary marks of the little hamlet are washed out, and class and caste and sect are forgotten in a broad and fruitful union. Here is a man whose sympathies are at the flood, and the obstructing barriers have melted away. Caste and class fall before the impetuous stream. "A certain centurion's slave who was dear unto him." A slave who was dear unto him! A servant who was very precious unto him! Here is one conventional barrier overthrown. Sympathy has paid no heed to social grades, and centurion and servant are one. The servant's ailment is the master's grief. I need not proclaim how stern and threatening is the barrier which commonly intervenes between class and class, and cleaves society into alienated and unsympathetic divisions. We speak of master and man, of mistress and servant, but the "and" too frequently represents no vital conjunction. It is a dead ligature, a kind of doll's arm connection. If it be wrenched there is no pain; if it be bruised there is no bleeding. But here was a conjunction between master and servant made out of living nerves, sensitive sympathies, and the pains and joys of the one thrilled and throbbed into the live mind and heart of the other. Their conjunction was not mere connection, it was a fellowship; it was not an expedient, it was a life. They were members one of another.

Mark the further advance of the gracious flood. "He loveth our nation!" What! the Roman loving the Jew? Here is another hoary rampart overthrown. "He loveth our nation." Racial limits are overpassed. A citizen of imperial Rome, nurtured in the glowing ambitions of a world-wide dominion, finding room in his sympathies for the undistinguished and unattractive people of the Jews! That is a type of sentiment by no means common and exuberant Patriotism is usually sternly self-contained and exclusive. Its manifestations, beyond its own boundaries, are too commonly selfish and soured. It is like the juices of many trees, which, when they escape from their own enveloping bark, congeal into stiffness and bitterness. The cup of patriotism rarely flows over into cosmopolitanism. I am not quite sure that even we English people can claim a very exuberant love for other nations of the world. Our sympathies run broad and deep among the English-speaking peoples, and it is well and good, but I do not know that their exclusiveness is much vaster, and I am perfectly sure they do not include the Jews. Where is the Jew loved? And, yet, let us remember that in all essential characteristics he was the same in the time of the Master as in our own day. If he be repellent now, he was equally repellent then. If he be mean and grasping, if his name has become a synonym for treachery, the dark degeneracy has not occurred in the Christian centuries. He was what he is, and the centurion loved him. Profound sympathy discovered his wealth, discerned the lovely even among the base, sought fellowship with the lovely, and loved it. Roman patriotism did not congeal into Roman pride, but flowed out in discerning sympathy, paying no heed to racial limits, and finding home and sustenance in the universal good.

Can we trace the sympathy into yet finer issues? "Himself built us our synagogue." A Roman discerning the beauty in the worship of the Jew. "Himself built us our synagogue." Ecclesiastical boundaries overflowed. It is a welcome sign of broadening and enriching vision when we begin to take sympathetic interest in the religious aspirations and worships of others. It is a sure sign of dwarfed and crippled life when religious interests are self-contained and exclusive, when we cannot see the beauties in another mode of worship, nor find a single foothold for kinship and communion. But our sectarian fences are so emphatic and pronounced that it is difficult for our sympathies to get beyond them. Our boundaries are so apt to be made of spiked railings and barbed wire, instead of green and perfumed hedge-rows. When sympathy is refined, kinships are discerned, and even where there is much that is alien, we shall discover much that is common. Here, then, is the breadth and depth of the Centurion's sympathy. In its gracious comprehensiveness social barriers are submerged, and servant and master wedded in vital union, racial limits are submerged, and peoples of varied characteristics united in fruitful fellowship; ecclesiastical boundaries are submerged, and communion established with the wealth of an apparently alien faith. "His servant was dear unto him." "He loveth our nation." "Himself built us a synagogue."

Now I am not surprised to find that a man of such spacious sympathy is also a man of profound humility. That is not a mere coincidence, it is an inevitable moral consequence. Sympathy is creative of humility. Large sympathy; deep humility! No sympathy; colossal self-conceit! Sympathy means association, vision, comprehension, outlook. Large sympathy implies large spaciousness and far-reaching outlook. Absence of sympathy means absence of vision, lack of space, life confined to one's own court-yard. Now a little thing looks big when it is set in a small room. The piece of furniture which looked dwarfed in the warehouse assumes quite respectable proportions when set in the narrower surroundings of your own home. If you want a little thing to look big, put it into a small room. A fly is conspicuous on a saucer, it is lost on a lawn. A man of no sympathy, of no spacious vision, is set in a small place, and self bulks big, and becomes possessed by a swelling conceit. But when self is seen in large associations, in wide social spaces, when comparisons are disclosed by broader fields, then self assumes accurate proportions, and self-conceit subsides into a healthy self-esteem. Yes, sympathy is the key to life's proportions, and therefore the parent of humility. I am not surprised therefore that a man whose sympathies went out to the slave, to foreign peoples, and to alien sects, should manifest a character absolutely devoid of self-conceit, and characterised by profound humility. I am not surprised to hear him say, and I am sure he means it, "I am not worthy that Thou shouldest come under my roof, neither thought myself worthy to come unto Thee." Where sympathy abides, humility dwells.

Sympathy is here; humility is here; then you have got a fine discernment. When you have in a life a broad surface of sympathy, allied with a deep and fruitful humility, you have obtained a sensitive plane of spirit, which, like the photographer's most exquisite plate, will register the finest impressions of light. Sympathy and humility are the conditions of moral and spiritual discernment. Let these be absent, and discernment and apprehension are blunted and impaired. Without sympathy and humility life is hardened, and a thousand mystic visitors may knock at our doors unheeded and ignored. But with their presence there is a fine alertness of surface which instinctively discerns the approach of the highest, and tremblingly thrills to its touch. "The humble shall hear thereof and be glad." "Shall hear," and shall know. How love can interpret a footfall! "That is my husband coming!" "How do you know?" "Oh, I know his step; I know the way he opens the door." The interpreting discernment of an alert and sacrificing affection! "The humble shall hear!" They shall know the Lord's footfall when He is about. They shall know His knock when He taps at the door of their life. I do not wonder that this humble, sympathetic centurion heard the footfall of an unearthly step. I do not wonder that he discerned the uncommonness of the Christ. I do not wonder that his spirit thrilled at the mystic Presence, as the leaves of the silver birch thrill in the light wind which stirs with the dawn. "I am not worthy that Thou shouldest come!" "Neither thought I myself worthy to come unto Thee!" "Thou! Thee!" He discerned the majesty of the wonderful Presence, and his soul fell prostrate in adoring homage and awe. If we wish to discern the King when He is about, we must keep our hearts soft and sympathetic. We must exercise our pities. We must send our hospitable thoughts over unfrequented fields. We must live in large spaces, in search of ever-widening fellowship, and in the humbleness of mind begotten of hungry sympathy, we shall discern the King in His beauty, and shall most assuredly love His appearing. \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

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that he might have another chance. What will the Lord say to him? "Simon, ... lovest thou Me?" Was it half-critical, half-ironical, a little condemnatory? Was it a sentence with an index pointing back to his denial? It may have been. To Peter it was; but whatever the Lord had said would have brought the dark hour back to Peter's mind and heart. But it was something deeper than all this. Christ wanted to comfort this poor, self-distrusting soul. "Lovest thou Me?" It is more than a question; it is an appeal, an expression of the Master's hunger. Only love hungers for love. Mere power hungers for obedience. When you do not love a person you care nothing for his love! But if you love, how you hunger for love! "Lovest thou Me?" The appeal for Peter's love expresses the Master's love. What the Saviour longed for He was giving. "Lovest thou Me?" implies "I love thee." The Lord saw the love that dare not confess itself. He beheld the springs of affection welling up in Peter's heart. But Peter was afraid to tell it! Yet the Lord wanted the confession. He knew that confession would break the alienation, and reconciliation would be complete. "Confess again, Simon!" The Lord saw in Peter a love that would be faithful unto death. In that self-distrustful soul before Him He beheld a martyred Peter wearing a martyr's crown. "Lovest thou Me?" "Thou knowest that I love Thee!" In that confession the alienation was ended, and the old confidence more than restored. "He knew what was in man." "He calleth His sheep by name."