

Jasper



ANTHONY ESOLEN

MAGDALEN COLLEGE
OF THE LIBERAL ARTS

Word of the day:

PROTECT

A crowd surrounded Jesus as he was walking toward the village. They were excited.

“You should do this for him,” they said.

“He has been good to our people.”

“He built a synagogue for us.”

“He has kept the tax collectors honest.”

“He believes in the Lord God.”

The man they were talking about was a Roman centurion. That meant that he was in charge of one hundred soldiers. We might call him a captain in the army, who takes his orders from the major or the colonel or the general, and gives orders in turn to his lieutenants.

But suddenly the man himself was there, a soldier of the great Roman empire, that stretched from the Atlantic Ocean in the west to Persia in the east, and from England in the north to the African desert in the south. And this soldier bowed before Jesus, a mere carpenter from a defeated people, the Jews.

The centurion had a servant he loved who was near to death. We don't know how old the

servant was. He could have been a boy. He could have been an old man who had been with the centurion's family for a long time, who may have carried him on his back when the centurion was himself a boy.

“Lord,” began the centurion. He called the carpenter “Lord.”

“Lord,” he said, “I am not worthy that you should enter under my roof.”

Was the centurion saying that Jesus should not bother with his dying servant? Was he having second thoughts?

Can we imagine the moment? Jesus stops, and looks upon the centurion with care, waiting.

“Only say the word,” said the centurion. “Say the word, no more than a word will do. Say the word, and my servant will be healed.”

In my mind's eye I see Jesus looking still, and giving the centurion the time to show his

soul.

“You see,” he explained, “I am a man under authority. I say to this man here, Go, and he goes, and to that man there, Do this, and he does it.”

Silence. Even the disciples of Jesus hardly understood what was going on. They were



waiting to see Jesus lay his hands upon the dying servant, because his hands were filled with power. But the centurion understood that Jesus did not have to touch the servant; all he had to do was to say a word, to will it, and the servant would be healed.

Jesus said, “I have not seen faith so great, in all of Israel!” In all of Israel herself – and here was this man of Rome, this pagan, filled with faith. “Go,” he said, “your servant shall be healed.” And so he was, from the moment Jesus said the word.

You may wonder why the centurion said what he said about his *roof*. Try to imagine what life was like in a time when people spent almost all their waking hours outdoors, in the heat of the sun, in the cold of winter, in rain and snow and every other kind of weather. You couldn’t live like that always. You had to come in from the weather, and you could not always sleep under the open sky at night, exposed to the wild beasts. You needed a roof.

The Latin word for roof is TECTUM, and that is what you say at Mass, when you repeat the words of the centurion in Latin: “Lord, I am not worthy that you should enter under my roof.” If you are under somebody’s roof, that

means that he is PROTECTING you: he has cast a TECTUM over you, he has put a ROOF over your head, so that you can rest under its shade. But the centurion understood that if he were PROTECTING Jesus, it would seem as if he were the superior, and Jesus was only his guest. He felt that that would be wrong. He wanted the

PROTECTION of Jesus instead. So he said what he did, and Jesus marveled, and with a word, a mere word, he cured the centurion’s servant.

If you think about it, you’ll see that no matter what you use to make a house, whether it’s stone or clay or wood, the one thing that your house has to have

is a ROOF. So in some languages, the old word for ROOF becomes the word for HOUSE. If you go into a Scottish church, you may see the words TIGH DHE, which just means HOUSE OF GOD: the TIGH is the Scottish cousin of that Latin word TECTUM. In other languages, that same word for ROOF would name the material you made the roof from, and that was the case in our own language, English: and that’s our word THATCH, a thick covering for roofs in England, made out of straw.



Anthony Esolen is a lecturer, translator, and writer. Among his books are *Out of the Ashes: Rebuilding American Culture*, and *Nostalgia: Going Home in a Homeless World*, and most recently *The Hundredfold: Songs for the Lord*. He is a professor and writer in residence at Magdalen College of the Liberal Arts, in Warner, New Hampshire.

Magdalen College of the Liberal Arts is a joyfully Catholic, great books college located on a mountain in beautiful New Hampshire. The college offers a transformative liberal education of the whole person, ordered to human flourishing and communion, animated by the perennial questions, given shape by the classic books, and nourished by a vibrant liturgical and sacramental culture. Magdalen College calls all within her community to enter the great conversation of authors seeking wisdom that has unfolded across the ages, cultivating a life of virtue, poetic imagination, service, and life-giving fidelity.