

At Caesarea there was a man named Cornelius, a centurion in what was known as the Italian Regiment. He and all his family were devout and God-fearing; he gave generously to those in need and prayed to God regularly. Acts 10.1-2.

It is entirely appropriate that, on this solemn day of Remembrance of those who have fallen in war, the next person we meet in our study of *Acts* happens to be a soldier. He was called Cornelius, and was a centurion in the Italian Regt. As we shall see on later Sundays, this Cornelius will play a key role in one of the most important developments in the spreading of the Gospel. God will use this Roman soldier, this Gentile, to bring about a massive U-turn in St Peter's whole way of thinking. Through Cornelius God will reveal that the saving Good News of Jesus Christ is not just for Jews, but for the whole world. That was going to be something that would be very hard for Peter the Jew to accept. More of that later.

Any of you who have had any dealings with the Armed Services will know that, though you can't generalise, the military tend to be a tough, hard-bitten lot. They have to be, for obvious reasons. Warrant Officers are the pick, the most senior, of the NCOs, and, roughly speaking, that is what a centurion in the Roman Army was. The Roman Army was probably the best army the world has ever seen, and the centurions were the backbone of it. The odd thing is that in the NT these centurions of this ruthless, occupying Roman army, get a very good press. If you turn to p 972, to *Matt 8.5ff*, we meet another Roman centurion who had taken over Jesus' country. Jesus actually commended him in v10... And then he goes on to foreshadow what will happen through Cornelius, the other centurion, the gathering in of Gentiles and Jews, vv11-2...

There is, of course, a *third* centurion who was at the Cross when Jesus died. The Jews with all their religion could not see who Jesus was. All *they* wanted to do was kill him, yet it was a foreigner, an outsider, a rough Roman soldier who saw who he was, the Son of God. P1023, *Mark* 15.33-39..

St Luke tells us, back here in *Acts* 10, that Cornelius the centurion was, together with his family, God-fearing, charitable to the poor, and prayerful. The pagan rituals of the Roman state clearly did not feed him in the depths of his soul. Some Roman soldiers looked to the exotic cult of Mithras. (There are Mithraic shrines on Hadrian's Wall). Others, like Cornelius, looked to the Jewish religion. What held them back from becoming a full Jew was, for very obvious reasons, the necessity of circumcision.

What I want to remind ourselves of this Remembrance Sunday is that service personnel have spiritual needs. I told you the other Sunday that I had six lads who came up to me after a class about 'Spiritual Values in Military Service' who wanted to be baptised. Those lads may well be a bit rough and ready, but they have spiritual needs too. They just haven't had a chance to come to church, to read scripture and to know the Lord Jesus. Cornelius was clearly spiritually hungry.

We're all made up of body, mind and soul. When I welcome patients to the Police Convalescent Home, I remind them that the Trustees are keen to look after not just the body, but the whole person, and that includes the mind and the soul. It goes without saying that members of the Armed Services are going to be called on to do things beyond the ordinary. They will see

things which the ordinary person in the street will not come across. They need inner resources to help them cope. Drugs and alcohol abuse are big problems in the Army because the stresses are so great. There is a huge increase in mental health issues, and marital problems. It's not hard to see why when we ask our troops to do a six month tour in Afghanistan, come home for a couple of months, and go back again. It puts huge stresses on marriages and families. How can soldiers be loyal to their regiments and mates, *and* to their wives and families who are fed up with these co-called 'back-to-back tours'? And we haven't even mentioned yet the endless fighting an enemy you can't see, who doesn't fight according to any rules, in a war that just seems to go on for ever.

Medics can patch up bodies, and welfare officers can provide practical help and support, especially to families worried to death at home, but who is going to help with those big questions like 'Why?' This is where the padres come in. Padres are probably seen as a waste of time back home in peace-time, but they really come into their own when they're right up at the front with the troops. A member of the congregation told me a story of a troop-ship he was on, as it left Clydeside for who-knew-where. The padre held his little services on deck as the ship steamed out into the Atlantic. A handful of people came, probably to cheer up the padre. The big tough commando types just sharpened their knives. But as the ship turned towards Gibraltar, things changed. As that ship entered the Med, more and more men joined the padre on deck. They need God, and they need our prayers and support.

My father fought in Korea and thereafter never saw hostilities again. It was all Berlin, BAOR and Catterick. The Cold War gave us an eery peace. But since the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 we have been living in a very unstable world with strange, unpredictable terrorist enemies who don't fight conventional wars according to the rules. If you go up to the AFC you'll see soldiers with rows and rows of medals. It's constant action these days. Sure, that's exciting, but it's also dangerous, and hard on their families.

They are God's children, and the Church does its outreach for Christ through the padres of the three Services. Armies have always had chaplains. The Army Chaplains' Dept was first formally founded in 1796. In the Crimean War there were 26,000 troops and one solitary deployable chaplain. That soon changed, and in the First World War there were famous padres like Woodbine Willy, Tubby Clayton. Theodore Bayley Hardy, Noel Mellish and WRF Addison all won the VC. Such is the state of today's British Army that many of our padres (and medics among others) are actually TA. A friend of mine, the Revd David Latimer, minister of 1st Derry, is out in Afghanistan at the moment. His blog is printed each month in the *Presbyterian Herald*. We can follow him and support him with our prayers.

Cornelius the Roman centurion reminds us that soldiers have a tough job and have spiritual needs and longings. Jesus came to the house of a centurion and commended his faith. God used Cornelius to spread the gospel world-wide. A soldier stood at the Cross and recognised Jesus as the Son of God. If Jesus came to soldiers, let us pray and care for our military.