Wouldn’t it be great if God could be persuaded to bring back someone like Elijah to do in our day the equivalent of what we heard about in our first reading? To do something which would leave people in no doubt about the reality of who he is and what he can do? Something which would lead those who saw it to fall on their faces and say, ‘The Lord indeed is God; the Lord indeed is God.’

It’s a great story, isn’t it? We’ve only heard the second half this morning - the part Elijah plays in all this. But it’s worth savouring the contrast between that and what the massed ranks of the prophets of Baal get up to in the first half of the story. Have a look when you get home!

But that’s surely what we need in today’s world, isn’t it? So many of the situations we hear about in the news would be transformed if only God would ‘put a bit of stick about’, to coin a phrase. Not shilly-shallying around but making it abundantly obvious that ‘the Lord indeed is God’. And that he and those who serve him are not to be messed around with.

Unfortunately for those of us who are inclined to think in this way, God doesn’t seem to be in the business of repeating himself like this. Elijah’s encounter with the prophets of Baal was a one-off event. The truth for us to come to terms with is that demonstrating his power in such a way that no-one can doubt it is not how God usually chooses to behave. Rather than force people to believe in him through what they see, it’s more important to God that people choose to believe in him through faith. So repeat performances of what happened on Mount Carmel are unlikely. It’s not that God can’t step in like this - the whole point of the story in 1 Kings is to show that he can! - but that, in general, he chooses not to.

But this doesn’t mean that we should completely downplay any expectation of seeing the power of God at work at all. Far from it! The point is that God doesn’t tend to use his power to compel belief, not that he doesn’t use his power at all! Extraordinary things happen, not in order to create faith but as a response to faith. Which is where we come to today’s Gospel reading...

We’re rather drawn to this centurion, aren’t we? In the first place, there’s the attractiveness of his humanity. He has ‘a slave whom he values highly’. In a culture where slaves are almost literally ‘two a penny’, this tells us something important about him. He refuses to treat his slave merely as a piece of property but values him as a fellow human being. Indeed, he values him so highly that he is prepared to step outside his comfort zone by asking Jesus for help - with all the risk of disappointment and embarrassment if Jesus says ‘no’.

And then there’s the fact that, as a Roman centurion, we might have expected him to keep a rather haughty distance from the local population. But no. We discover though that he has taken the trouble to get involved, that he has even stepped in to pay the bills when the opportunity arises to build a new synagogue.

Which leads us onto a second thing about him - not just the attractiveness of his humanity but also the attractiveness of his humility. The thing about him is that he has every reason to expect that Jesus will be willing to help him. He has powerful backers who are more than happy to tell Jesus that he really deserves his help.
Verses 4-5 tell us some of the Jewish leaders come to Jesus and appeal ‘to him earnestly, saying, ‘He is worthy of having you do this for him, for he loves our people, and it is he who built our synagogue for us.’ But, even so, he holds back from approaching Jesus personally.

Indeed, when he realises that Jesus is on his way and is nearly there, he sends another group of friends with a message. Verses 6-8: ‘...Lord, do not trouble yourself, for I am not worthy to have you come under my roof; therefore I did not presume to come to you. But only speak the word, and let my servant be healed. For I also am a man set under authority, with soldiers under me; and I say to one, “Go”, and he goes, and to another, “Come”, and he comes, and to my slave, “Do this”, and the slave does it.’

But here’s the thing: we notice that Jesus doesn’t comment on his humanity or on his humility, impressive though they are. What catches Jesus’ attention is the centurion’s underlying faith. Verse 9: ‘When Jesus heard this he was amazed at him, and turning to the crowd that followed him, he said, “I tell you, not even in Israel have I found such faith.”’

This is what unlocks the situation. The centurion’s willingness to trust, to believe without needing to see. This is what leads to the conclusion in verse 10: ‘When those who had been sent returned to the house, they found the slave in good health.’

Lord, as we reflect on the example of this centurion, grant us faith which is content to trust you, grant us faith which is able to amaze you, grant us faith which experiences you at work in our lives and in the life of our world. For your glory’s sake. Amen.