

Scripture Reading for Sunday May 19th 2019

Acts 11:1-18 (NIV)

11 The apostles and the believers throughout Judea heard that the Gentiles also had received the word of God. ² So when Peter went up to Jerusalem, the circumcised believers criticized him ³ and said, “You went into the house of uncircumcised men and ate with them.”

⁴ Starting from the beginning, Peter told them the whole story: ⁵ “I was in the city of Joppa praying, and in a trance I saw a vision. I saw something like a large sheet being let down from heaven by its four corners, and it came down to where I was. ⁶ I looked into it and saw four-footed animals of the earth, wild beasts, reptiles and birds. ⁷ Then I heard a voice telling me, ‘Get up, Peter. Kill and eat.’

⁸ “I replied, ‘Surely not, Lord! Nothing impure or unclean has ever entered my mouth.’

⁹ “The voice spoke from heaven a second time, ‘Do not call anything impure that God has made clean.’

¹⁰ This happened three times, and then it was all pulled up to heaven again.

¹¹ “Right then three men who had been sent to me from Caesarea stopped at the house where I was staying. ¹² The Spirit told me to have no hesitation about going with them. These six brothers also went with me, and we entered the man’s house. ¹³ He told us how he had seen an angel appear in his house and say, ‘Send to Joppa for Simon who is called Peter. ¹⁴ He will bring you a message through which you and all your household will be saved.’

¹⁵ “As I began to speak, the Holy Spirit came on them as he had come on us at the beginning. ¹⁶ Then I remembered what the Lord had said: ‘John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.’ ¹⁷ So if God gave them the same gift he gave us who believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I to think that I could stand in God’s way?”

¹⁸ When they heard this, they had no further objections and praised God, saying, “So then, even to Gentiles God has granted repentance that leads to life.”

Sermon: God’s Outside The Box Thinking

Peter’s encounter with Cornelius is so important to Luke that he tells the story twice!¹ And given the expense and rarity of written documents in those days, and the limited physical length of a scroll, we should reflect on why Luke does that. The short answer is that this incident marks the beginning of the Church’s mission to *non-Jews*.² The earlier persecution of the early church in Jerusalem had the effect of dispersing many of its members elsewhere,³ but up until now their focus had been on *only* spreading

¹ A modern adaption of this story occurs in Reddish, *The Amish Farmer Who Hated L.A.* (2015), p83-89.

² This was a critical issue in the life of the church and very important for Theophilus and Acts’ non-Jewish audience.

³ Acts 8:1.

the Jesus-story to Jews and, at a stretch, to Samaritans - and even they had some ancestral Jewish blood in them!⁴ There seems to have been a real hesitancy in the early church to reaching out to non-Jews - or a lack of understanding of Jesus' life and teaching as being "good news" for *everyone*. And so, according to Luke, God dramatically and independently communicates to Peter and to - of all people (!) - a Roman centurion called Cornelius.⁵ The outcome is that they meet and, in the process, cultural boundaries are crossed and taboos and prejudice overcome. More than that, God's Spirit is again dramatically present in a Pentecost-type experience at the home of Cornelius and, following that, he and his household were baptised and welcomed into the church.

Our reading this morning is the second of Luke's accounts of events. One of Newton's laws of motion is that "for every action there is an equal and opposite reaction," and this is true in this situation too. You might think, "What's the big deal; surely if God is demonstrably at work then this is a good news story?" But that is *not* how one prominent group of Jewish Christians in Jerusalem saw this development. And if Peter did not handle the crisis well, it could have been detrimental in the life of the early church. Indeed, we might not be worshipping here today! That's why this is so important to Luke and his audience. Let's explore this a little this morning.

These events don't happen in a vacuum. We heard last week how Peter went to the coastal town of Joppa and raised Tabitha (also known as Dorcas) from the dead.⁶ There is a curious line at the end of that story: "Peter stayed in Joppa for some time with a tanner named Simon."⁷ Tanning, with its contact with dead animals, is a ritually *unclean* profession for Jews⁸ and it was therefore virtually impossible for Simon to be in community. He was an "outsider" *not* because he was immoral, but simply because of the nature of his job. Yet Peter knew that Jesus hung out with such people.⁹ We should not overlook this subtle point that Peter stayed in Simon's home and thereby had already overcome some of the religious taboos of strict Jews.

As I mentioned earlier, after his encounter with Cornelius and going into *his* home in Caesarea,¹⁰ there was a backlash from some strict Jewish Christians in Jerusalem.¹¹ They criticized Peter for entering the home of a non-Jew and eating with them.¹² This is just the tip of the iceberg of their concerns.¹³ Peter didn't respond by appealing to an Old Testament text, he simply relates his experience of what happened. He begins by saying that he too understood - and originally shared - their qualms over non-kosher food. But while at Joppa, he had a strange nightmare of a vision of a sheet [or sail] being lowered

⁴ Acts 8:4-25.

⁵ See Acts 10:2,22. Cornelius completely overturns the stereotype of a hated Roman centurion. See also Luke 7:1-10.

⁶ See: <https://standrews-amherstburg.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/The-Ordinary-and-The-Extraordinary.pdf>

⁷ Acts 9:43; 10:6.

⁸ See Num 19:11-13; that is why he lived by the sea away from the population of Joppa; tanning also used a lot of water.

⁹ Luke's gospel relates this matter at length.

¹⁰ Caesarea was an important garrison town about 30 miles up the coast from Joppa.

¹¹ This is not the last time this issue comes up; see Acts 15, 21, and Gal 2:12.

¹² Acts 11:2. Jews would not share "table fellowship" with Gentiles because they could be sure how the food was prepared.

¹³ Presenting their concerns charitably, it could be they were concerned on maintaining unity within the fellowship (Acts 2:42-17; 4:32-35). However, Acts 15:1,5 suggests the key concern was that non-Jews could become Christians without formally becoming Jews through circumcision together with other related issues on ethical practices (see Acts 15:1-35).

from heaven that was full of ritually unclean animals.¹⁴ Then he heard a divine voice saying, “Get up, Peter. Kill and eat.”¹⁵ He was horrified, saying: “‘Certainly not, Lord, for nothing defiled or unclean has ever entered my mouth!’ But the voice replied a second time from heaven, ‘What God has made clean, you must not consider ritually unclean!’” This all happened *three* times.¹⁶ Peter didn’t have time to process the meaning of this confusing-but-emphatic vision because three men had arrived asking him to visit Cornelius. They too were on a divine mission, because Cornelius himself had a personal encounter with an angel, who gave him the message to send for Peter and informing him that he was staying at Simon the tanner’s house in Joppa.¹⁷ If you read Acts 10-11, you will see Cornelius’ story of the angel is told *four* times in all! Luke’s point - and Peter’s defense in Jerusalem - is that it was *God* who brought Peter and Cornelius together, a Jew and a non-Jew, yet in different ways. Peter, still confused over the vision, discerns the Holy Spirit urging him to go and see Cornelius; he also takes *six* others with him who can bear witness all that what transpired.¹⁸ Peter then tells his critics about the angel’s instructions to Cornelius, namely, to get Peter as he will “bring you a message through which you and all your household *will be saved*.”¹⁹ And with this information we get hints of the iceberg below the waterline. It is not just the table fellowship with Gentiles these strict Jews objected to, it was that Cornelius and his household had also *received salvation and were baptised*;²⁰ they had become part of the people of God – and they had not even been circumcised!

Peter further explains what occurred. He had barely started preaching²¹ when the Holy Spirit came in power.²² This was a Pentecost-like moment and they spoke in tongues.²³ Peter’s point is all this was *God’s doing* and not arising from his own initiative or a result of his preaching. Peter concludes, “If God gave them the same gift he gave us who believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, *who was I to think that I could stand in God’s way?*”²⁴ That last line is critically important in Peter’s defense: “Given all that we had witnessed, who was I to put a barrier between them and God?”²⁵ That is why he baptised them and welcomed them into the church, because he was formally recognising that God had *already* embraced them as part of the family. Earlier, on arriving at Cornelius’ home, we read of another epiphany moment for Peter as he realises the meaning of his vision, “I now realize that God does not show favoritism but accepts from every nation the one who fears him and does what is right.”²⁶ If the coming of the Holy

¹⁴ Acts 10:10-16; 11:5-10.

¹⁵ Acts 10:13; 11:7.

¹⁶ The fact that this happened *three* times is a significant; it shows that it could be no possible mistake or fudging the issue.

¹⁷ Acts 10:1-8; 22-23; 30-33. 11:4-14.

¹⁸ Acts 10:19; 11:12. In Egyptian law, which the Jews would know well, seven witnesses were necessary to prove case completely. And in Roman law, which they would also know well, seven seals were necessary to authenticate a document. (The differences in the NRSV and the NIV in 11:12 shows some subtle difficulties in translation.)

¹⁹ Acts 11:14. This added mention of salvation does *not* appear in Acts 10.

²⁰ Acts 10:48. The *is* a formal process whereby a non-Jewish male can become a Jew, and this involves circumcision.

²¹ Acts 11:15; 10:34-44.

²² Peter also recalls the words of John the Baptist; see Acts 11:16; Luke 3:16; Acts 1:5;8.

²³ Acts 10:44-46; 11:17. Baptism of the Spirit occurs before water baptism in this case!

²⁴ Acts 11:17; see also Acts 10:46-48. The apostle’s Pentecost experience was *empowering them for ministry*. There is no evidence that was the case for Cornelius and his household.

²⁵ See also Acts 5:29, where Peter says “We must obey God rather than people.”

²⁶ Acts 10:34-35.

Spirit on Cornelius and his household signifies their conversion or salvation, then these two “aha” moments for Peter point to *his own* change of mind. Everyone present was enriched by this encounter as the Holy Spirit led them into the deeper truths of God’s wisdom.²⁷

What was the reaction of Peter’s critics? They raised “no further objections and praised God, saying, “So then, even to Gentiles *God has granted repentance that leads to life.*”²⁸ Notice how they began with objecting over table fellowship with non-Jews but ended up agreeing that *God* was indeed at work giving forgiveness and life. We can learn a great deal from this today; let’s consider that aspect further.

An inherent feature of this story is *prejudice* or an *inherent bias* against another person. It is all about those who are “in” and those who are “out.” Those who are like “us” and those “others.” Those going to heaven and those going to hell, to put it very crudely! Prejudice can become reinforced with lots of exaggerated, apocryphal stories to reinforce it. For example, some Jews would not go into a Gentile’s house and eat with them because they were concerned that they could be polluted by dead bodies under the floorboards! And non-Jew thought that Jews were stuck-up, unsociable people because they wouldn’t eat pork, which was the cheapest available meat in most places, and because they insisted on having one day off work each week, and they wouldn’t join in the social parties centered on civic temples.²⁹ It is very easy to allow prejudice or social stereotyping dismiss a whole group of people. Dr. Seuss explores this in his story of *The Sneetches* and J K Rowling highlights the tensions and biases between non-magical muggles and those of the wizarding community in the Harry Potter saga.

Today we see prejudice and discrimination in rampant racism and xenophobia, especially toward Muslims and Jews, and to those of different colour or language, or who speak English with an accent. In parts of the world there is also prejudice and violence toward Christian minorities. All this spills over into negative attitudes toward immigrants and refugees – again, it’s all about who’s “in” and who’s “out.” There is also prejudice and suspicion toward the LGBTQ community, and you don’t need me to tell you how this is creating severe tensions in all branches of the world-wide Church. Extreme prejudice incites hatred and leads to violence, whether that is in the Middle East, Europe, India, New Zealand, or much closer to home. Intellectual arguments for mutual acceptance and tolerance are helpful, but the Peter-Cornelius story gives a different strategy: first get to know personally those who you and I consider to be the “other.” Invite them into our homes and visit them in theirs. We can then discover they are just like you or me, with a similar love of family, career aspirations, and moral values, etc. Positive personal encounters are more likely to change our attitudes than intellectual or religious arguments.

Coming back to the LGBTQ issue and the Church for a moment, getting to know gay Christians and recognising the Holy Spirit working in their lives³⁰ is an appropriate place to start resolving this - and other complex - issues. Cornelius was not just *any* Roman centurion; we are told he was devout and

²⁷ See John 16:13.

²⁸ Acts 11:18.

²⁹ For the Jew, these prejudices were not irrational but were how they understood the Mosaic law. Paul and others are equally clear that, in light of Jesus, the Old Testament law was to be seen as God’s words for a particular period and purpose.

³⁰ Both the “fruit of the Spirit” (Gal 5:22-23) and the diverse “gifts of the Spirit” (1 Cor 12:7-11; Eph 4:7-13; Rom 12:3-8).”

honoured God; he gave generously to those in need and prayed regularly – he was even respected by the Jewish community in Caesarea!³¹ Moreover, regardless of Peter’s initial biases and prejudice, it was through witnessing God’s undeniable activity in Cornelius’ life that Peter was able to conclude: “If God is at already work here, who am I to exclude him from God’s family?”³² I now realize that God has no favorites but accepts those from every social grouping who honour him and who does what is right.”³³ Like Peter, we learn God’s Spirit *goes ahead* of God’s mission, calling those who seek him, and we learn to extend grace to others, not least because we ourselves are the recipients of God’s undeserved grace.

Three further things to briefly note: first, this Peter-Cornelius incident, and Peter’s defense of his actions to the Jewish conservatives in Jerusalem, does not appear to be the end of the matter.³⁴ The deeper issues reappear again in Acts 15. The important *ethical* implication of conversion is the Spirit’s *ongoing* work *throughout* our lives. No one becomes a saint³⁵ overnight! Second, the question is not so much “What does the Bible say on this or that issue?” but “What is God’s Spirit undeniably doing in our presence today?” Of course the Scriptures *are* important and normative for the Church, but as Christians we are *alive* in the Spirit and not merely “people of the book.” Third, notice how Peter himself is changed by this encounter, as is the gospel message itself. It is not all about Cornelius changing so that he can become like Peter, as if Peter is superior to Cornelius. It is *not* that others must adapt to *our* ways and become “one of us” – how boring would that be! God’s Spirit works to build unity out of diversity and in the kingdom of God we must learn to recognise that God loves a varied family. If the church could genuinely live out that positive example in practical ways it would be a powerful witness to a world that is stuck in a cycle of prejudice and retaliation that spirals down into even more violence.

The Peter-Cornelius encounter was a powerful and transitional event; it changed the course of Church History. God’s Spirit was at work inspiring the church to think outside the box, revealing the church’s wider calling beyond just that to Jews. We are similarly called to follow that example and reach out to those very different from ourselves and say, “Welcome to God’s family!” Are we up for it? Let us pray.

³¹ Acts 10:2,4,22.

³² Acts 11:17. This, then, resulted in a (vital) paradigm shift in the theological outlook of the early church.

³³ Acts 10:34-35 – adapted.

³⁴ Despite the stated outcome being: “they had no further objections and praised God, saying, ‘So then, even to Gentiles God has granted repentance that leads to life.’” (Acts 11:18).

³⁵ I use the word “saint” here in the proverbial sense, *not* the biblical sense.