

Peter and the Gentiles.

Acts 11:1-18; John 13:31-35.

About a year ago I preached about the startling transformation of Peter the apostle after the Resurrection when he encountered the Risen Jesus and after Pentecost when he was filled with the Holy Spirit. I am sure that many of us love the erratic Peter of the Gospels, if only because we find hope for ourselves in his constant gaffes and misjudgements. What a contrast with the Peter of the Acts of the Apostles, a confident and courageous leader of the infant Church.

Our Gospel reading is a pivotal moment in the hours before the arrest of Jesus. Judas had just walked out into the night, away from Jesus and the Disciples. He was intent on betrayal. From now on, there was no turning back. The Cross had become inevitable. This explains the sense of urgency as Jesus proclaimed his New Commandment of Love.

But let us concentrate on our reading from Acts. To understand the revolutionary significance of what was going on in Acts 11 we must read it in the context of the previous chapter and the divine call to the Roman centurion Cornelius and his household to seek out a man called Simon Peter in Joppa. We must also try to put aside our assumption that it was always God's plan to reach out to the Gentiles. Let us try to project ourselves into the mind-set of the believers gathered in Jerusalem, who were themselves facing persecution and even annihilation at the hands of the hated Roman army of occupation. Many were Jews. For them Jesus was the Messiah of the Hebrew Scriptures, sent to save God's Chosen People, *Israel*. The prophesy of Simeon that Jesus was also sent as a light to lighten the Gentiles was far from being part of their mainstream understanding of their discipleship. Israel was defined by its Jewishness, by adherence to the Hebrew Law and all its demands of ritual purity. We read that even Peter was shocked by the profanity of any unclean food passing his lips. And central to the Law was circumcision. After all, God had said to Abraham, "You shall circumcise the flesh of your foreskins, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and you". [*Genesis 17:11*] Those who were not circumcised were rebels, guilty of stubborn rejection of God's grace. That Law was the bedrock of the "circumcised believers" in Jerusalem.

Therefore it followed that the generic term "Gentile" by definition meant "not one of us". Throughout Jewish history Gentiles had always been "the enemy"; peoples whom Israel had occupied and oppressed such as Cannanites; or peoples who had oppressed Israel such as Egyptians or Assyrians or Babylonians. And let us not forget that Luke was writing Acts only a decade after the Gentile Romans had destroyed the Temple and massacred tens of thousands of Jews in Jerusalem. Many Jews were understandably hostile to any outreach to the Gentiles.

Our later Christian understanding that “circumcision is nothing and uncircumcision is nothing” [*1 Corinthians 7:19*] or that “There is no longer Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave and free; but Christ is all and in all” [*Colossians 3:11*] would seem shocking to many in the early Church. Indeed, when we take this teaching seriously it is still shocking to some Christians! We are still drawn to the sin of exclusion rather than the sometimes challenging joy of inclusion and diversity. No wonder that Peter had to use all his powers of leadership and persuasion to win over his fellow followers of Christ to accept Gentiles into full Christian communion!

So how did the Holy Spirit make Peter understand God’s startling call to make disciples of the Gentiles (something that probably stood on its head everything that Peter had believed as a devout Jew) and then to empower Peter to persuade a hostile Christian congregation to accept such madness?

The dominant imagery here is of a dream or vision. It may seem strange to us, but such ideas permeated the Hebrew Scriptures. As God promised through the prophet Joel: “I will pour out my spirit on all flesh; your sons and daughters will prophesy; your old men shall dream dreams; and your young men shall see visions” [*Joel 2:29*].

In chapter 10 of Acts Cornelius, a centurion of the Italian Cohort of the army of occupation, was summoned by name by an angel of God. The account is precise and graphic: “One afternoon at about three o’clock he had a vision in which he clearly saw an angel of God coming in and saying ‘Cornelius’”. [*Acts 10:3*] The parallels with God’s revelatory call to the Jewish Patriarchs and Prophets would have been obvious. “God said to him ‘Abraham’, and he said ‘Here I am’”. [*Genesis 22:1*] Or, “Samuel was lying down in the temple of the Lord where the ark of the Lord was. Then the Lord called ‘Samuel, Samuel’, and he said ‘Here I am’”. [*1 Samuel 3:3-4*] Just as God had called the leaders of his Chosen People Israel by name, now he is calling the whole of humanity, even a Roman!

In chapters 10 and 11 Peter also had vivid dreams of a sheet lowered from heaven containing ritually unclean animals which he was to kill and eat. At first he was slow to understand [*10:17*] but God’s message, that he should cast aside his traditional reluctance to reach out to a Gentile became powerfully clear. Luke’s readers would quickly recognise the scriptural imagery, recurring so often, of the voice of God as a divine revelation challenging his people to think the unthinkable and step out boldly into territory that is alien and terrifying.

And another aspect of this narrative that is revealing is that it was not just Cornelius who was called to baptism and to obedience to the Holy Spirit. God embraced his family and whole household. Thereby they became part of the rich tradition of Covenant blessing of families and descendants

from generation to generation. Truly they joined Abraham and his issue, numerous as the dust of the earth and the stars of the heavens. Salvation through Jesus was not just for Israel. It was for the whole of humanity, the family of God, brothers and sisters of each other and one in Jesus Christ.

So what lessons do these passages have for us as modern disciples of Jesus? Our God is a God of Surprises. His Spirit will call us to open our minds to new dreams and visions. He will stand our traditional wisdom on its head. If we listen prayerfully, we shall hear him call us by name. He will lead us into paths we never imagined as part of our discipleship. Just as Jesus had confidence in his friends in that upper room when he gave them his New Commandment of Love, he has confidence in us, misplaced as it may seem, to proclaim his Kingdom to all people. Let us rise to his challenge.

Amen