

Acts 10:1-23a

God breaks down barriers

“O dear me, the world’s **ill divided**

It’s them that work the hardest

Are aye with least provided”

To say that the world is divided, whether we are talking about class, culture, religion or race, is a bit like saying that grass is green. I grew up in Northern Ireland in the late sixties/ early seventies in a society which was becoming more polarised by race culture and religion. In my family it wasn’t so much that we hated Catholics, it was more that we had no contact with them. Meanwhile there were race riots in the USA and South Africa was divided by apartheid. Today these problems have to some extent been solved, but there is hatred and division in so many places; just think of Iraq, The Middle East, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo for example. And sometimes the United Kingdom does not seem very united.

The society Jesus lived in was also divided.

There were divisions between rich and poor;

between the Jews and the Roman army of

occupation; and many Jews could not use the

word Gentile without adding the word dog.

And that’s where we join Acts chapter 10.

To begin with the church was seen simply as a

Jewish sect. But now the great stride is to be

taken which will carry it over the fence and

into the Gentile world and make it a world

wide movement. This was a massive change; it

would involve years of difficulty, of training,

of struggling to overcome prejudice within the

church. No wonder then that it needed a

miracle or two to get things started.

In this evening’s reading we see God at work in

2 lives. God, as it were, lays his right hand on

Cornelius, his left on Peter, and brings them

together. Now it was not unknown for Early

Christians to spread the word to Gentiles

(remember the story of Philip and the Ethiopian

in Acts 8), but there is a special significance in

Peter’s actions here because Peter is an apostle

and so his welcoming of Gentile Christians becomes the act of the whole community. As Peter enters Cornelius' house, it is the beginning of the end of the purely Jewish phase of the church.

Our story divides naturally into 2 parts. The first part is verses 1-8, **Cornelius sends for Peter.**

Here we have the vision which guided the seeker to the light. Cornelius, a Roman centurion in Caesarea has a vision in which he is told to send for a man called Simon, a man he had never heard of but whom we know as Simon Peter the apostle.

Caesarea was not the first place where you and I might have looked to find a seeker for God. Nor might we have looked for a centurion, an officer of the worldly power of the Roman Empire, so loathed by every Jew. But somehow Cornelius' time in Judea had touched his spirit with some knowledge of the God of Israel. He would probably have been serving for a long time, brought into contact with the religion of

the Jews with its one God, and like many Romans of the time, very sceptical of Roman gods and their immoral actions.

The 3 or 4 centurions mentioned in the gospels and in Acts are all favourable to the gospel, though I suspect they were the exception rather than the rule. They are bright examples of people who have a serious interest in coming to God despite their background and surroundings. They teach us a lesson, a lesson which we need constant reminders about, which is that we should never write people off or look down on them because of their class or job or circumstances. Nor should we make assumptions about people's character because of their appearance.

Remember, the last place to look for a first gentile convert would have been the army barracks in Caesarea, but that is precisely where God's angel went looking. Cornelius was drawn to the religion of the Jews he had adopted their hours of prayer, revered their God, turned away from worshipping idols,

gave alms to the people as acknowledgement that their God was his God and he had clearly influenced his own household, including slaves and soldiers.

He and all his family were devout and God-fearing; he gave generously to those in need and prayer to God regularly. (Verse 2)

The preacher Alexander Maclaren puts it like this:

This is a beautiful picture of a soul feeling after a deeper knowledge of God, as a plant turns its half-opened flowers to the sun

It is a principle which we find often in the Bible; seekers like Cornelius do not grope without touching, they do not seek without finding.

There are people who come to Jesus and go away disappointed. Just think of the rich young man who came to Jesus one day. Jesus challenged him to turn his back on his money and follow him – but the man wouldn't do it. His money was more important to him than following Jesus.

And he was not the only one. On one occasion many of Jesus' disciples turned back from following him because they found his teaching too hard:

From this time many of his disciples turned back and no longer followed him (John 6:66)

But there is a promise for anyone who truly seeks God. Here it is in Jeremiah 29:13:

“You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart.”

Cornelius is praying. He is making himself open to God and he is about to find that God rewards those who earnestly seek him.

The all-important truth in these verses is that the prayers, the generosity to the poor and the devout heart of this man who had never heard of Jesus were acceptable to God. Make no mistake; Cornelius still needed Jesus, indeed the reward which God gave this devout man was that he did get to know Jesus. On the one hand Scripture makes it clear that a heathen heart which longs for a dimly known God and is stretching towards the light finds that its

prayers are accepted by God. What a ray of light for people who are searching. On the other hand there is the truth that

“Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved.” (Acts 4:12)

Christ is the only Saviour, but if I dare to use a gardening metaphor, it is not for us to say how far off from the channel in which it flows the water of life may percolate, and feed the roots of distant trees. Cornelius’ religion was not a substitute for Christ, but was the occasion of him being led to Christ and finding full salvation in Him. God leads seeking souls in His own wonderful ways. We can entrust those who seek into his loving hands knowing that no heart ever hungered for righteousness that was not filled.

The gospel message is for all. I realised one day many years ago that this meant it was for me; that when Jesus said in John 6:37 “Whoever comes to me I will never drive away”

he meant me. And so I took that promise for myself and I became a follower of the promise-giver and found that his word was true.

But to return to Cornelius; the instruction given to him by the angel in this vision was a test of his faith. He was being asked to go to some unknown Jew who apparently did not own his own house but had to lodge with a man who tanned animal skins for a living. But without delay, as soon as the angel had departed, Cornelius’ confidential servants, sympathisers with him in his religion, were told the story and sent on their way to Joppa.

If we are really seeking for God, we will respond when he points out our path to the light, even when it seems unlikely or unattractive.

The second part of our reading is concerned with **Peter’s vision**.

We can see from verses 8 and 9 that the messengers must have travelled by night along the coast, as they went no doubt discussing their strange errand as they went and

wondering what they would find. The preparation of Peter, which was the other essential part of God's plan, was timed so that it was completed just as the messengers stood at the tanner's door.

Just picture **the scene** as the messengers arrive. Peter is up on the roof of the seaside house in Joppa. He could no doubt see the shimmering waters of the Mediterranean Sea in the heat of the midday sun. I wonder if his thought took him overseas to distant lands beyond the horizon. The prophet Isaiah had looked forward (Isaiah 42) to the coming of God's servant, the one in whom the islands would put their hope. The prophet Joel had looked forward to the day when God would pour his spirit on all people, verses which Peter himself had quoted to the crowds at Pentecost. Jesus, as he left the disciples, had told them:

"You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." (Acts 1:8).

And Peter himself was called to be a "fisher of men", no longer catching fish in the land-locked Sea of Galilee but moving out into a much wider sea and looking to catch people. Peter was hungry. His hunger coloured his state of mind even as he fell into a trance and dreamed of food. This became God's point of contact to reach Peter. God is able to use our bodily needs to give us his message.

To us, with the benefit of hindsight, the **meaning of the vision** is clear. To Peter it was not at all clear (verse 17, Peter is left wondering about the meaning of the vision). In the context of the story we can see that the sheet let down from heaven by its four corners containing all kinds of creatures is the symbol of universal humanity. Peter cannot see beyond the animals and the OT regulations about what you were allowed to eat and what was forbidden. He needed time to understand the command "Kill and eat"

It's interesting that Peter's old, bold nature was still present. God was at work in Peter's life,

changing him, making him more like Jesus, but still there is a flash of the old impulsive Peter which on one occasion had led him to rebuke Jesus. Jesus had been explaining that he had to die on the cross when Peter burst in with the words:

“Never, Lord, this shall never happen to you!”

Peter’s words here are quite similar as he is faced with this vision:

“Surely not, Lord”

It is a reminder to us that although God is at work in the lives of his people, he still has a long way to go. As the sticker says, be patient with me, God’s still at work.

Peter is shocked by the vision. He comes up with a strange but very human reason for not obeying. He has never done what he is now being asked to do. It doesn’t make much sense; God tells him to do a new thing, and his reason for not doing it is that it is new! Sometimes we too can use the past as an excuse for not moving ahead into the new thing which God asks us to do.

Peter must have felt pursued by the number 3! Three times he denied Christ; three times Jesus told him to feed his sheep; three times the sheet in the vision descends to earth.

The great truth which Peter has to learn is that all the restrictions which separated Jews and Gentiles are now removed. All people have the same standing before God, therefore the gospel has to be proclaimed to all people and the same response is demanded from us all.

But how was Peter to make the connection between the vision and the message?

Answer; it was explained by **circumstances**.

The best commentary on the vision was the people who were just arriving at the door. But the explanation was not just left to circumstances. The Spirit of God directed Peter to go with the messengers. It was such a dramatic break with the past that the Holy Spirit had to give Peter a direct command. What was new here was not the idea that the gospel was to be preached throughout the world. What was new was the lesson that the

Gentiles could come into the church without going through the door of Judaism. New converts did not have to first be received into the Jewish community before becoming Christians.

It took Peter and the others years to digest the lesson given in the vision on the housetop, but he began to put it into practice that day. How little he understood the implications of this truth now revealed to him. How little we understand it 2000 years later! There is no room for exclusiveness in Christ's church. Jesus ministry was supremely about doing his Father's will. Along the way, he deliberately set out to destroy the walls that people set up between themselves and others and between others and God.

Just consider for a moment the **feeding of the 5,000**, the only miracle reported by all 4 of the gospel writers. The people who followed Jesus were a cross section of the population, including men, women and children, Jews and Gentiles and people of different faiths.

Suddenly food becomes an issue. Suddenly it became an issue who was sitting next to you and whose hand had dipped into the basket before you. Could a Jew seriously be expected to take food from the same basket as a Gentile? Were the men really expected to eat with the women and children? What chance did anyone have of keeping the food purity laws with 5,000 people sitting round the table?

The Kingdom of God was a kingdom which was open to all, and the feeding of all these people was a huge parable of what Isaiah had predicted:

“On this mountain the Lord Almighty will prepare a feast of rich food for all nations”
(Isaiah 25:6)

God's banquet is open to all, but we cannot choose who we sit beside.

There is no place for looking down on anyone because of their background, colour, race or class; there is no reason for setting ourselves up as superior; and we have to be very careful that

we do not turn anyone away who wants to come to God.

Some of Jesus' harshest words were reserved for people who turned others away from the Kingdom.

When the disciples tried to drive children away from Jesus on a particularly busy day, Jesus got angry as he said:

"Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the Kingdom of God belongs to such as these." (Mark 10:14)

And one of the things which angered Jesus about the Pharisees was what Jesus said in Matthew 23:13:

"Woe to you, teachers of the Law and Pharisees, hypocrites! You shut the kingdom of heaven in men's faces. You yourselves do not enter, nor will you let those enter who are trying to."

By their priorities, their example and their scorn of those who had a simple faith, they prevented others from having a living relationship with God.

Let us be careful that we, by our words and our example, are people who clearly welcome others into God's Kingdom.