

Peter and Cornelius Acts 9:43 – Acts 11:18

Earlier this year we started preaching through the Book of Acts, which tells the story of the birth of the Church and its expansion into the west.

I've said before that this is only part of the story and that as Acts focuses on Peter and Paul moving west into Turkey and Europe, so, at the same time, others of the Disciples scattered to the East and South into North Africa, Ethiopia, Iraq and as far as India in the same period that Acts covers.

And it's a very important part of the bible for us to get hold of because it tells the story of the birth of the Church and what God put into the DNA of the Church at its beginning.

And as I've said previously, it's important because we are the continuation of the same Story. Acts finished shortly before Peter and Paul were killed, but the story of Acts – Chapter 29 and following are still being written.

I believe in the Big Bang Theory – that on the Day of Pentecost, Tongues of Fire came and rested on the Apostles and the Church exploded – and that explosion is still going on.

It started in Jerusalem and then Judea – the area around. Then it crossed to Samaria – going to the natural enemies of the Jews who were close geographically, but very different culturally.

And then it continued – and is still continuing to the ends of the Earth.

And the Crown, and every other church was planted and has grown through the momentum of that original explosion – and it will continue until it has reached every corner of the Earth, every people-group; every language; every culture; every nation. And once that has happened, and the Earth has been truly filled with the knowledge of the Glory of the Lord, then Jesus will come again to take His Bride – the worldwide Church to be with Him forever.

And the Book of Acts tells the story of this expansion in this order – Jerusalem, where up to 1/3 of the city became believers and they met openly, daily in the Temple Courts with an awesome sense of God's Presence and amazing miracles and people holding them in high regard and the number growing daily.

And the surrounding countryside of Judea being affected –
Crowds gathered also from the towns around Jerusalem, bringing their sick and those tormented by evil spirits, and all of them were healed. (5:16)

And then there was persecution as Stephen was stoned to death and the Disciples were scattered – some of them, including Philip and then Peter, to Samaria, where they saw many receiving the Gospel and being filled with the Holy Spirit.

And Philip even met with a God-fearing Gentile from Ethiopia who became the first non-Jewish person to follow Jesus.

But because of the strength of the Jewish tradition and Law that the Disciples had grown up in, it seems like they got stuck at this point and I want to tell the story this morning about how God stepped in to keep the Gospel advancing.

Out of the 12 Apostles, Peter was the one who was most outward-looking from Jerusalem; he and John had been on a trip down to Samaria to see what God was doing there, and had recognised that it was the same Holy Spirit changing Samaritan lives as had changed theirs in Jerusalem.

And then Peter went on another trip down to Lydda and Joppa, where he prayed for Aeneas and Dorcas, which is where we got up to before the summer.

But it still seems like his background was still acting like a rope round his leg, stopping him leading the way into the nations. Acts 9 finishes with this:
Peter stayed in Joppa for some time with a tanner named Simon. (Acts 9:43)

Tanners (people who made leather) weren't who good Jewish people would hang around with. It was a very smelly job, so they lived and worked outside of villages.

And the Jews thought of them as being half unclean, and consequently disreputable, from the contact with dead animals and blood which was connected with it. The fact that Peter chose to stay there shows that there was something in him that was already tugging against the Jewish prejudice.
(Jamieson Fausset-Brown)

At the same time, there was another man – Cornelius, 30 miles to the north in Caesarea. It was a Roman town and he was a Roman centurion – an officer in the Italian Regiment of the army.

But although he was a Roman and not a Jew, he was seeking God.

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

One afternoon he had a vision where he saw an angel of God, who came to him and said, "Cornelius!"

Cornelius stared at him in fear. "What is it, Lord?" he asked.

The angel answered, "God remembers you - Now send men to bring back a man named Simon Peter. He is staying with Simon the tanner's house in Joppa

So that's what he did – he sent one of his soldiers, who was also devout, along with 2 servants.

About noon the following day as they were near the end of their journey and approaching the city, Peter, who knew nothing about this, went up on the roof to pray. He became hungry and wanted something to eat, and while the meal was being prepared, he fell into a trance.

He saw heaven opened and something like a large sheet being let down to earth by its four corners. It contained all kinds of animals, birds and reptiles – including ones that were unclean! Then a voice told him, "Get up, Peter. Kill and eat."

"Surely not, Lord!" Peter replied. "I have never eaten anything impure or unclean."

So the voice spoke to him a second time, "Do not call anything impure that God has made clean."

This happened three times, and immediately the sheet was taken back to heaven.

While Peter was wondering about the meaning of the vision, the men sent by Cornelius found out where Simon's house was and stopped at the gate – they couldn't go inside because they weren't Jewish, so they called out, asking if anyone knew a Simon Peter who was staying there.

Just at the same time, The Spirit said to him, "Simon, three men are looking for you. So get up and go downstairs. Do not hesitate to go with them, for I have sent them."

Peter went down and said to the men, "I'm the one you're looking for. Why have you come?" so they explained.

Then Peter, obviously affected by the vision he had just had, invited the men into the house to be his guests.

The next day Peter and some of the Believers from Joppa set off, and the following day, arrived at Cornelius' house. He was expecting them and had gathered all his relatives and close friends to meet Peter.

As Peter entered the house, Cornelius met him and fell at his feet in reverence. But Peter made him get up. "Stand up," he said, "I am only a man myself."

Peter went inside and found a large gathering of people. He said to them: "You are well aware that it is against our law for a Jew to associate with a Gentile or visit him. But God has shown me that I should not call any man impure or unclean. So when I was sent for, I came without raising any objection. May I ask why you sent for me?"

So Cornelius explained and said "now we are all here in the presence of God to listen to everything the Lord has commanded you to tell us."

Then Peter began to speak, really just saying what God had just shown him: "**I now realize how true it is that God does not show favoritism but accepts men from every nation who fear him and do what is right.** You know the message God sent to the people of Israel, telling the good news of peace through Jesus Christ, who is Lord of all. You know what has happened throughout Judea, beginning in Galilee after the baptism that John preached-- how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and power, and how he went around doing good and healing all who were under the power of the devil, because God was with him.

"We are witnesses of everything he did in the country of the Jews and in Jerusalem. They killed him by hanging him on a tree, but God raised him from the dead on the third day and caused him to be seen. He was not seen by all the people, but by witnesses whom God had already chosen--by us who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead. He commanded us to preach

to the people and to testify that he is the one whom God appointed as judge of the living and the dead. All the prophets testify about him that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name."

While Peter was still speaking these words, the Holy Spirit came on all who heard the message. **The circumcised believers who had come with Peter were astonished that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on the Gentiles.** For they heard them speaking in tongues and praising God. Then Peter said, "Can anyone keep these people from being baptised with water? They have received the Holy Spirit just as we have." So he ordered that they be baptised in the name of Jesus Christ. Then they asked Peter to stay with them for a few days.

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

It's easy to think "How did they miss the point so much?" but they had all grown up being told that Salvation belonged to the Jews and Jews were good, Gentiles were bad.

So Peter explained exactly what had happened:

"As I began to speak, the Holy Spirit came on them as he had come on us at the beginning...So if God gave them the same gift as he gave us, who believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I to think that I could oppose God?"

When they heard this, they had no further objections and praised God, saying, "So then, God has granted even the Gentiles repentance unto life."

This is such an important account because it means that we are not bound by Old Testament food laws.

It's even more important because, as far as I know, all of us come under the "Ends of the Earth" category, so without this encounter and Peter's vision, the Gospel may not have reached us, but instead, stayed as a sect of Judaism.

And finally, it's important, because it shows us something of God's Passion for the Nations.

He took the little step Peter was taking – waiting on the border of the nations, in the home of someone who was not ceremonially clean, and felt the tug on the rope.

He took the gifts and kindness of a Roman soldier and remembered them – He felt the tug of a man searching.

And then wonderfully; miraculously; He sent His angel to speak so specifically to Cornelius and spoke specifically and clearly to Peter.

It's amazing to see God's working from both people in the story and to see how clear God wanted to make this.

Why?

Because it is His Passion for His Gospel to keep spreading – He wanted to break the rope that was tugging back, stopping the Gospel's spread.

We don't always see it as clearly as in this story, but wherever the Gospel is going to new places and people – especially crossing cultures, I believe God is personally, powerfully involved.

The Crown:

Started with a supernatural **dream** & a call to **cross cultures**

God takes the **small steps forward** we make and is always ready to “**break ropes**” that tie us back.

Going to the nations is in the heart of the Church and God's Blessing is on the place where cultures meet.

Challenge for us – we have maybe lost some ground on this, but it remains our call & vision.