

## **SUNDAY 24 APR 2016 08:00/10:00 - GENTILES RECEIVE HOLY SPIRIT**

### **READINGS**

#### **Acts 11:1-18 - Peter's Report to the Church at Jerusalem**

**11** Now the apostles and the believers (*or brothers*) who were in Judea heard that the Gentiles had also accepted the word of God. <sup>2</sup> So when Peter went up to Jerusalem, the circumcised believers criticized him, <sup>3</sup> saying, "Why did you go to uncircumcised men and eat with them?" <sup>4</sup> Then Peter began to explain it to them, step by step, saying, <sup>5</sup> "I was in the city of Joppa praying, and in a trance I saw a vision. There was something like a large sheet coming down from heaven, being lowered by its four corners; and it came close to me. <sup>6</sup> As I looked at it closely I saw four-footed animals, beasts of prey, reptiles, and birds of the air. <sup>7</sup> I also heard a voice saying to me, 'Get up, Peter; kill and eat.' <sup>8</sup> But I replied, 'By no means, Lord; for nothing profane or unclean has ever entered my mouth.' <sup>9</sup> But a second time the voice answered from heaven, 'What God has made clean, you must not call profane.' <sup>10</sup> This happened three times; then everything was pulled up again to heaven. <sup>11</sup> At that very moment three men, sent to me from Caesarea, arrived at the house where we were. <sup>12</sup> The Spirit told me to go with them and not to make a distinction between them and us. These six brothers also accompanied me, and we entered the man's house. <sup>13</sup> He told us how he had seen the angel standing in his house and saying, 'Send to Joppa and bring Simon, who is called Peter; <sup>14</sup> he will give you a message by which you and your entire household will be saved.' <sup>15</sup> And as I began to speak, the Holy Spirit fell upon them just as it had upon us at the beginning. <sup>16</sup> And I remembered the word of the Lord, how he had said, 'John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.' <sup>17</sup> If then God gave them the same gift that he gave us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could hinder God?" <sup>18</sup> When they heard this, they were silenced. And they praised God, saying, "Then God has given even to the Gentiles the repentance that leads to life."

#### **John 13:31-35 - The New Commandment**

<sup>31</sup> When he had gone out, Jesus said, "Now the Son of Man has been glorified, and God has been glorified in him. <sup>32</sup> If God has been glorified in him, God will also glorify him in himself and will glorify him at once. <sup>33</sup> Little children, I am with you only a little longer. You will look for me; and as I said to the Jews so now I say to you, 'Where I am going, you cannot come.' <sup>34</sup> I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. <sup>35</sup> By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."

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As you've heard, Session 2 of the Growing our Church course starts tomorrow and then two weeks after that Eva and I will be presenting Session 3 which looks at our Culture - developing a community of invitation, welcome and hospitality. And it seems to me that our readings today speak directly into that space. In our reading from Acts this morning we again find the lovable but hot-headed Peter sitting on the naughty step where we've seen him so many times before in the Gospel accounts. Only this time, instead of Jesus putting him there it's the leaders of the church in Jerusalem. So what's been going on? Well, according to Luke, it seems that something utterly scandalous has been taking place. Apparently Peter has not only been cohorting with gentiles but has actually baptised some of them into this new way of Judaism without them having been circumcised first. It's an absolute outrage. And so the apostles and believers in Jerusalem are demanding an immediate explanation. It must have sent quite a shock wave round the early church because Luke decides to include the story twice in his account - an abbreviated version in Chapter 11, which we heard this morning, and also a full version which occupies the whole of chapter 10. And in a moment we're going to take some time to unpack these events but first I want to say a few words about the Gospel reading to set the scene.

Now today's gospel reading is a very brief extract from a lengthy passage that extends over 4 chapters and contains John's version of the final words of Jesus to his disciples before his arrest, trial and execution. Jesus was spending his last few hours with his disciples, those who were so close to him the past 3 years, those who had sat at his feet and listened to his teaching and saw his miracles. And with the impending events of the day hanging heavy over his head, Jesus opened his heart to his disciples. He talked with them about the tremendous ordeal that lay ahead later that evening and into the next day, Good Friday, and beyond. He told them about the Spirit who would come when he was no longer with them and he prayed for them. And as Jesus is comforting them and encouraging them, he gives them a command. Twice, as we heard, Jesus commands his disciples to 'love one another'.

It's important to recognise here that Jesus is giving them a command. This isn't something that is optional for the disciples. Jesus didn't say: "Here's my suggestion: love one another." "Here is what I recommend: that you love one other." He said, "*This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you.*" And the natural question is to ask, what is Jesus' love like? Well, Jesus himself explains it, "No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you." In other words, if you want to be my friend, be a friend to my other friends. That sounds so simple, but we know it's not.

Someone once said this, parodying a well known Sunday School song, to describe the attitude of many Christians, "Jesus loves me this I know and this is all I want to know." I'm sorry, but that is the opposite of what Jesus expects of his disciples. Judging from Jesus' own life we can say that the love we see in Jesus is a love that wishes for the recipient a deep joy, even in difficult times. A love that requires one to be knowledgeable about the life of the loved one and to take that person to God in prayer. A love that is willing to make sacrifices for the loved one. It's amazing how far unconditional love will go, isn't it? But there's more. You see true love is not simply about giving up one's life to die for another, like jumping on the grenade. True love is also about giving up your life while you're still living. True love is giving up my wants, my desires, setting aside my preferences and prejudices in order to help and serve my fellow brother or sister. It's a huge challenge isn't it and completely counter cultural?

Okay, fine, we might say. Jesus wanted his friends, the original twelve disciples, to love each other as he loved them. What does that have to do with us? Just this: those first disciples were the church in making, so what he said to them I believe he says to us also. That he calls us to make a similar witness in our time and place. Which means that he wants us to love each other

as he loved his disciples. He wants us to love each other with a love that wishes the deepest joy for one another, that causes us to bring one another to God in prayer, and that is willing to make sacrifices for each other. That is what Jesus wishes for us, the 21<sup>st</sup> century church. Well, actually, he put it a bit stronger than that. That is what he *commands* for us, the church. So, how did the early church put this commandment into practice?

Let's return to Acts to see an example of how Peter responded years later and the challenge he faced, and I'm going to be working through the full version of events in chapter 10. This chapter tells the story of the conversion by Peter of the Roman Centurion Cornelius, a gentile. It's an absolutely pivotal moment in the New Testament because without it the mission of Jesus to extend the Gospel to the remotest parts of the earth might never have been realized. And although it's Good News, because it paved the way for all of us to become part of God's kingdom, it's also very challenging because it invites us to reflect on the kind of people that Jesus calls his friends and welcomes into his kingdom.

Now Cornelius is depicted in the New Testament as a God-fearing man who always prayed and was full of good works and deeds of alms. But, he's not a Jew - he's not circumcised and he doesn't keep a kosher house. Nevertheless Cornelius receives a vision in which an angel of God tells him that his prayers have been heard. The angel then instructs Cornelius to send some men of his household from Caesarea, where he lives, to Joppa, where Peter is staying.

In Joppa meanwhile, at the same time as Cornelius's men are on their way over from Caesarea, our dear lovable Peter goes up on the roof to pray, but so Peter-like, he's too hungry to concentrate. All of a sudden Peter has a vision too. In Peter's vision, he sees all manner of four-footed beasts and birds of the air being lowered from Heaven in a sheet and a voice commands Peter to eat. When he objects to eating those animals that are unclean according to Mosaic Law, the voice tells him not to call unclean that which God has cleansed or purified. And just to drive the message home the vision is repeated three times. I guess that God was still working on Peter's prejudices. In the meantime, Cornelius' men arrive downstairs and start to mill around in the street. Peter's still on the roof trying to connect the dots, lost in a daze. We all know that God has infinite patience, but at this point even God's patience seems to be exhausted because he sends the Holy Spirit to the roof, to yell in Peter's ear, "Snap out of it! You've got visitors! Downstairs! Go! Now!"

Peter gets the idea and hot foot's it downstairs where the men give him the message from Cornelius. The next morning, Peter and six of the Jewish believers from Joppa leave with the men to walk the 30 miles back to Caesarea. When Cornelius himself meets Peter, Cornelius falls at his feet in adoration but Peter quickly tells him to get up. Peter then jumps in with both feet and basically says, "I'm Jewish, part of God's most-favoured-nation, you're not. Normally that means I wouldn't even give you the time of day. But I just had this vision - there was a sheet, and animals, and I was hungry, but I couldn't eat, but you know what God told me?" And here's where our beloved Peter finally gets it right and shows he's learned the lesson which changes the world. "You know what God was trying to teach me? That no matter who you are, or where you come from, if people come to God, love him, listen to him, show him some respect, and try their best to obey him, then he'll love, heal and save them, no matter what they eat or don't eat. What's more, I know it's true, and so do twelve others, cause when we walked with Jesus in this world, he personally showed us, and what's more..." But there's no reason for Peter to go on testifying because suddenly, without warning, the gentiles are speaking in tongues just as happened to the Jews on the day of Pentecost. The Jews among the group are astonished that Cornelius and other uncircumcised gentiles should begin speaking in tongues, praising God. However Peter understands the significance immediately as the work of the Holy Spirit and he orders that Cornelius and his followers be baptized.

The conversion of Cornelius is an incredibly significant event in the history of the early Church.

The gates of the Church, within which thus far only those who were circumcised and observed the Law of Moses had been admitted, were now thrown open to the uncircumcised Gentiles without the obligation of submitting to the Jewish purification laws. But we also see the conversion of Peter here – the conversion of understanding which permits him to put aside his prejudices and join in a mission he would never have thought possible before. And how did the leaders in Jerusalem react when they heard this explanation? The final verse of our reading this morning tells us - When they heard this, they were silenced. And they praised God, saying, "Then God has given even to the Gentiles the repentance that leads to life."

So what about us? I dare say that just like Peter and the early church leaders, we have our prejudices today that need to be put aside. It has been said that you can safely assume you've created God in your own image when it turns out that God hates all the same people you do. People that are different to us or on the margins - travellers, sex workers, immigrants, asylum seekers, gay men and women, Catholics? You see, friendship with God calls us to be friends with the kinds of people that our prejudices would prefer us not to be. It calls us to be more fully accepting of God's disturbingly inclusive grace. What a comfort to all the despised in our day who thirst for the dignity that comes from spiritual equality in Christ. What a challenge to the church to live out, through acceptance across racial, class, ethnic and gender lines, our proclamation that we serve an impartial loving God who has sent us a universal Lord & Saviour.

To conclude my talk I'd like to share with you a story that I heard Tony Campolo, an American evangelist, tell at Greenbelt a few years ago. I think I've told you this story before, what story haven't, but I love it and so I'm going to tell you it again. Tony's friend, Jim, is a pastor of a small church in Brooklyn, a run down, burnt out area of New York. One Tuesday Jim gets a call from the Funeral Director down the road who said that there was a man who had died but nobody would handle the funeral because the man had died of Aids; would he be willing to handle the funeral. So I took the funeral, he said. When I got there about 30 or 35 homosexual men, openly homosexual men were there. Their heads were down. The whole time I spoke they never looked up at me, they just stared at the floor. When I'd finished we went outside and got into the cars that followed the hearse to the cemetery. At the cemetery I stood on one side of the grave and these homosexual men stood on the other side. I read some scripture, I said some prayers, I committed the body to the grave. The whole time I was speaking the men stood like statues, staring straight ahead, glazed eyes.

When I'd finished the benediction I turned to leave but not one of them moved. So I turned back and said is there anything more I can do to help? Is there anything more I can do to help? One of the men said yes. They always read the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm at these things. This is the first funeral I've been to where they haven't read the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm, could you read it. So Jim read the 23<sup>rd</sup> psalm. Another guy said, if you're reading scripture there's a passage I love about the Holy Spirit blowing wherever the Holy Spirit wants to go. That no church, no institution can control the Holy Spirit, I think it's in the third chapter of John. So Jim read from the third chapter of John, how the spirit bloweth where it wishes, that you cannot tell from whence it comes or whence it goes and so it is with everyone who is born of the spirit. And then finally someone said, the 8<sup>th</sup> chapter of Romans, right at the end, will you read it? And so Jim read – neither height nor depth, neither principalities nor powers, neither things present nor things to come, neither life nor death, nothing can separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord. Nothing can separate us from the Love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord. Now I don't know what else the church of Jesus Christ is all about today but if it's not about loving the wrong kind of people then it's not the church that Jesus came to create. Of that we can be sure. On the night before he died Jesus said to his disciples "This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you." In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, Amen