

Peter and Cornelius

Acts 11:1-18

There's a wonderful book by the Jesuit priest, Gerard Hughes, written for 'bewildered, confused and disillusioned Christians.' It has the brilliant title *God of Surprises*, highlighting a very important insight into the nature of God that he constantly surprises us.

I remember reading a comment by Tom Wright a few years ago about the book of Ruth, the Moabite woman, who trusts God and is faithful to her mother-in-law Naomi and who becomes, in time, the great-grandmother of David. He writes: *it sits within this culture and theology as a beautiful little time bomb*. Ruth appears again in the New Testament in the carefully crafted genealogy of Matthew foreshadowing a time when the doors of Kingdom of God would be blown open to people of faith of all nations.

But this vision of the Kingdom of God is not yet one that is grasped by the Early Church, because it is still locked into an understanding of the gospel as being exclusively for the people of Israel. And yet, as we see from the book of the Acts of the Apostles, the Spirit is always thrusting the disciples out and interacting with the circumstances of their lives to proclaim the gospel to new groups of people. As Jesus had promised just before his Ascension: *You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria and to the ends of the earth*. Thus far the extent of their mission, particularly the apostles, was limited to Jerusalem, until Stephen is martyred and a fierce persecution of the Christian community follows. Believers are then scattered into Judea and Samaria and, wherever they go, they proclaim the word (Acts 8:4), people respond and there is *great joy*.

But God's purposes go further to reach beyond Judea and Samaria to bring the message of all that Jesus has done to all peoples. But, for this to happen, old ways of thinking have to go. There is resistance in Jerusalem, a resistance among the apostles and resistance in Peter himself, the leading apostle. Inherent prejudices have to go. These are reflected in the reaction of Jewish Christians in Jerusalem: when they here of those of their number visiting the homes of gentiles and receiving their hospitality. This was unacceptable; it's not unlike the complaints Jesus himself when he receives and eats with sinners. Gentiles were regarded as second-class citizens, if citizens at all. One extreme rabbinical proverb suggested that God's purpose in creating Gentiles was *to fuel the fires of hell*.

So how does the Spirit, the great initiator of mission, break down this barrier that was crucial for the whole future of the church?

Well first he prepares the ground through two parallel visions:

- First to **Cornelius**, a Roman army officer, a Centurion, a representative of oppressive Roman occupation - a Gentile, but one drawn by the worship and moral teaching of Judaism, and looking for a fuller experience of God. In his vision he is told: *Send to Joppa and bring Simon who is called Peter* (11: 13).
- Secondly to **Peter**, who was clearly beginning to overcome traditional prejudices. He was staying with a tanner, whom strict Jews would have regarded as unclean and he'd already seen and rejoiced in the gospel reaching Samaritans. Peter was at Joppa on the coast, he'd gone up on the rooftop of the house to pray at noon, where he might have seen the fishing boats with their sails unfurled sails heading out to sea. He was perhaps ready for lunch. As he prayed, he dozed off and in a dream, three times he saw

a great sail come down from heaven, full of unclean animals, prohibited in the Law of Moses from being eaten, and he hears a voice:

Get up Peter; kill and eat.

In his dream he responds: *By no means, Lord; nothing profane or unclean has ever entered my mouth.*

Just then there is a knock on the door, Cornelius' servants asking for Peter and requesting him to go to Cornelius' house in Caesarea. And the Spirit says to Peter *not to hesitate to go with them, for I have sent them.*

The next day Peter goes to Caesarea with Cornelius' delegation and, before Peter has finished speaking, the Spirit comes on them in the same way it had done at Pentecost, so that the Jewish Christians present were astonished... *even on the Gentiles.* It's an astonishment that was shared by the Church in Jerusalem when Peter reports back: *Then God has given, even to the Gentiles, the repentance that leads to life. (11:18)*

A deep-seated prejudice was addressed by the Spirit's initiative: Gentiles are as much God's people as those from a Jewish heritage. It was not fully overcome and the prejudice would reemerge - even a few chapters later in Acts chapter 15 - the issue of Gentile membership of the Church. Culture is very resilient and cultural prejudice is very difficult to overcome, but the clear message through the actions of the Spirit is that all are welcome in God's family, that God does not show favouritism.

May we rejoice in the richness of variety of race, language, culture, gender, background, class, education, age that God gives us in our Church family. And may the Spirit of God continue to highlight continuing prejudices that we may be the family of God reflecting that wonderful diversity in our life together. Amen.

Chris Butt (23/08/20)

References:

Hughes, Gerard W, *God of Surprises*, Darton, Longman and Todd, 1985