

Prejudices Purged

Text: Acts 10: 34-35

Readings: Isaiah 61:1-3; Acts 10:1-23a; 34-48

How do you feel about those people who live in your neighbourhood?

How do we feel about those people who live in Doveton or Toorak?

How do we feel about people from China, India or the Sudan?

How do we feel about those people who do share our faith

but do so in a different way Roman Catholics, Baptists or Anglicans?

How do we feel about those people who have money, success and career

or how do we feel about those who are disadvantaged, weak and marginalised?

All of us will answer these questions in a different way.

In a way conditioned by our upbringing and our cultural setting.

All of us, if we are honest, have our own set of prejudices.

Our own set of views about those around us.

Often these prejudices are so deep seated that it is difficult for us to change our views

Just like us, the apostle Peter and his fellow Jews have their own set of prejudices conditioned by their upbringing and by their cultural setting.

God challenges Peter's prejudices in three ways:

firstly through a vision,

secondly through a personal encounter with Cornelius the Gentile

and finally by turning up himself in the person of the Holy Spirit.

Chapter 10 is pivotal in the Book of Acts,

because it records the salvation of the Gentiles.

God uses Peter to bring the Gentiles into the church.

Peter was staying at Joppa on the Mediterranean coast.

It was the city where the prophet Jonah had fled to board a ship to Tarshish.

About 45kms north of Joppa was the Roman provincial capital, Caesarea, where the governor lived.

Under his authority were some 3,000 troops, including the Italian cohort.

Serving with this unit was Cornelius, a centurion who commanded 100 soldiers.

The Jews despised the Roman occupation of Palestine;

they hoped that Messiah would come and deliver them from the Roman oppression.

And so the stage is set:

you have a Gentile Roman soldier, representing the despised occupation of Israel, residing in the main city of the Roman occupation.

45km south you have a Jewish apostle, temporarily residing in the home of a tanner.

And behind the scenes, God is orchestrating the events to bring these two men together in a way that shocked both of them by breaking down the wall of prejudice between them.

The result of the story is that today you and I, who are Gentiles, are fellow members of the church with the Jews, and fellow partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel (Eph. 3:6).

The story breaks into three parts: three acts of the one play

Scene 1: the vision of Cornelius

Scene 2: The vision of Peter

Scene 3: The breaking through of the Gospel to Gentiles.

Scene 1

Notice the description Luke gives of Cornelius:

devout, God-fearing, generous giver and consistent in prayer.

He was a man in search of God.

A special type of Gentile, one who rejected paganism,
and had some loose connection with Judaism...

Though not a full proselyte...who was circumcised and followed all Jewish practices.

A "God-fearer" as in the case of Cornelius,
was likely Luke's way of describing "a deeply religious man."

God sent an angel to Cornelius, and the angel knew the gospel.

He could have explained the way of salvation to Cornelius and left Peter out of the loop.

But instead, he gave instructions to Cornelius on how to contact Peter so that Peter could preach the gospel to the Gentiles.

Isn't it just like God, that when He is pleased to open the gospel to the Gentiles,
He picks a Gentile who represents something that every loyal Jew hated—
a military commander from the occupying Roman forces!

Peter had to break out of his comfort zone in order to obey God.

Scene 2: Peter's Vision

Note also how the Lord worked gradually with Peter.

First, Peter was staying at the home of a Christian brother who was a tanner.

The Jews viewed tanners as unclean,
since they had daily contact with dead animal skins.

And, their houses were smelly places.

But Peter was staying there.

Peter was becoming increasingly unconcerned about obedience to the ceremonial law.

But it would still take special revelation from God to move him to minister directly to Gentiles.

It is one thing to be a follower of Jesus Christ and see that the Law cannot justify. It is another thing, for Peter the Jew, to fully understand how Gentiles fit into God's purposes.

And so around noon on the day after Cornelius' vision, Peter is up on the roof of Simon's house, and becomes drowsy and eventually falls into a kind of trance during the noon prayer hour.

It was then that Peter saw a vision of a sheet being lowered to the earth by its four corners.

On this sheet, were all kinds of four-footed animals, as well as reptiles and birds of the air.

This represents both those animals, which according to Leviticus 11 people were forbidden to eat, such as rabbit and pork, as well as those which were okay to eat, such as beef.

Then, Peter hears a voice which instructs him to "kill and eat."

Peter's response is what we would expect of any orthodox Jew who kept dietary laws. "*Yuck! Lord! I have never eaten anything unclean.*"

The voice, presumably that of our Lord, instructs Peter "*do not call anything impure that God has made clean.*"

This becomes an echo of what Jesus had told Peter and the other disciples back in Mark 7:

It is not what goes into a person that makes them unclean...
Rather what comes from the heart.

Then, the Lord repeated the vision three times for Peter, in order to impress the point on him.

No sooner had the vision ended than the three visitors from Caesarea arrived.

Peter would soon come to realize that these words had a far wider implication than simply what **he was**, or **was not**, allowed to eat.

Not only was Peter **not** to regard certain animals as unclean,
God was now telling him that all justified sinners,
including Gentiles,
who were no longer to be regarded as "dirty" simply because they were
Gentiles.

Peter hears the men at the gate and welcomes them into the house...

His prejudices coming down...he has allowed Gentiles into the house, and he ate with them.

Scene 3: At Cornelius' House

In verses 17-33, Luke moves on to describe the meeting between Peter and Cornelius in Caesarea.

Then it moves into the sermon of Peter and the result of that sermon.

When Peter arrived at Cornelius' house, he was surprised not only to find just a handful of Gentiles,
but a whole house full!

Peter's opening comment, about it being unlawful for a Jew to associate with a foreigner (10:28) was not a rude comment, as some think.

Rather, he was just acknowledging the obvious and explaining why he was deliberately violating the commonly understood customs.

Luke points out that Peter literally "opened his mouth," (The NIV notes Peter "began to speak) which is indicative that what was to follow was of great significance.

The great age of everlasting righteousness, foreseen by Isaiah in chapter 61, in which the Messiah would preach the good news to the poor and proclaim freedom for the captives and release for the prisoners was fulfilled in the person of Jesus Christ.

And now, here stands Peter, in a room full of Gentiles, proclaiming the same good news of Jesus Christ.

Though anticipated by the prophets, Peter makes explicit, what was until this time a great mystery. *"This is the message God sent to the people of Israel, telling you the good news of peace through Jesus Christ, who is Lord of all."*

Peter's brief and powerful sermon contains a concise statement about the Gospel:

Jesus' perfect life of servanthood.

His death on the cross (personally witnessed by Peter)

His fulfillment of Scripture and

The necessity of personal faith in him.

It did not need to be a long sermon...

But it was spirit-led and Christ-centred.

Jesus Christ was, and is, the way the truth and the life.

As Peter begins to explain the gospel to his hearers, three things clearly emerge.

First, there is a clear stress placed upon the fact that this is the message that God has sent.

It is God who has revealed these things to his people.

Second, the gospel is proclaimed to Israel, its intended recipients. But the gospel is not only to be proclaimed to Israel, for the prophets have foretold that the gospel would go out to the nations, to the ends of the earth.

And *last*, Peter emphasizes that this same gospel applies to the Gentiles, for Jesus Christ is Lord of All and God does not show favoritism.

During Peter's sermon, the Holy Spirit, "*came on all who heard the message*".

He came exactly as he had come upon the Jews gathered at Pentecost. One writer calls this account 'the Pentecost of the Gentile world'.

The Jews with Peter were astonished!
God has poured out his Spirit upon all flesh-- including the Gentiles.

Having received the Holy Spirit, Peter asks "*can anyone keep these people from being baptized with water?*"

And so Peter ordered all of them baptized in the name of Jesus.

It ultimately was the Holy Spirit who did the convicting and convincing. It was his power that changed minds, hearts and wills.

Good speaking, heart-tugging stories and biblical knowledge can be helpful but...
It was the HS at work in the lives of the Gentiles that brought about change.

Conclusion

Cornelius' story shows God's willingness to use extraordinary means to reach those who want to know him.

God doesn't play favourites.

Even at this very moment God is drawing men and women, boys and girls to himself. Watch out for signs of God at work in the heart of someone who is spiritually hungry.

What this means is that we should never look down on a person from any race or ethnic group and say: they are unfit to hear the gospel from me.

Or they are not worth evangelizing.

Or they have too many offensive habits to even get near them.

Peter learned from his vision on the housetop in Joppa that God rules no one out of his favor on the basis of cultural distinctives or physical distinctives.

Our hearts should go out to every single person.

Don't write off anybody. Don't snub anybody.

Don't check them out like the priest and the Levite in the parable of the Good Samaritan and then pass by on the other side.

Who have you excluded?

There are people in all of our lives which we have consciously decided that we want to avoid if we can help it.

This is a barrier to us sharing the gospel to them.

It may not be food which marks the difference between the lovely and unlovely.

it may be education - they don't speak good

it may be economic status, that they don't dress the same as us,
or that they don't live in the same suburb

it may be the colour of their skin

it may be personal hygiene - body odours, or their appearance, etc

it may be a personality trait which we find embarrassing

it may be that we live in Australia and they live somewhere else
out of sight and out of mind.

I wonder who God is laying on your heart now who you have excluded from your life.

If God is prepared to welcome them, so should we.

He want you to embrace that person with his love because, just as Peter found out, God equally loves us and everyone else on this earth.

Let me finish with a story.

In the late 1960's there was a lot of cultural upheaval that resulted in a wide gap between the younger and older generations, both in attitude and appearance.

Hudson Armerding was the president of Wheaton College at the time.

He was conservative in his grooming and attire.

He also despised the counter-culture movement, because to him it represented everything that was wrong with his country.

So he did not like it when students dressed in the grubby counter-cultural fashion.

Also, he thought that it was biblically inappropriate for men to have long hair.

One day Armerding was scheduled to speak in chapel.

Just before the service, they gathered for prayer.

Just before they began, a young man walked in who had a beard and long hair, and was wearing a sash around his waist, with sandals on his feet.

Armerding looked at him and was sorry that he had come in.

Worse yet, the student sat down right next to the president.

When they started praying, Armerding did not have a very good attitude.

Then the young man began to pray: “Dear Lord, you know how much I admire Dr. Armerding, how I appreciate his walk with you. I am grateful for what a man of God he is, and how he loves you and loves your people. Lord, bless him today. Give him liberty in the Holy Spirit and make him a real blessing to all of us in the student body. Help us to have open hearts to hear what he has to say, and may we do what you want us to do.”

As Armerding walked down the steps to go into the chapel, the Lord spoke to him about his attitude.

After giving his message, he asked the young man to come to the platform. A ripple of whispering went through the students, many of whom thought that the president was going to dismiss the young man from school as an example to the rest of the students.

But rather than rebuking him or dismissing him, everyone including the young man was surprised when Dr. Armerding put his arms around him and embraced him as a brother in Christ.

It broke up the chapel service, as students stood and applauded, cried and embraced one another.

God used that simple act of one man laying aside his prejudice to turn the mood on campus to greater love and acceptance of one another.

Dr. Armerding later learned that this young man had adopted his appearance in order to reach some of his generation who were alienated from God and the church (Hudson Armerding, *Leadership* [Tyndale], pp. 166-168).

God wants our local church to embrace and make all people feel welcome...
Regardless of culture, colour and creed.

Here's a radical prayer request: Ask God to show you your prejudices. When He does, ask him to let the word of Christ teach you to replace faulty assumptions and prejudices with a Christ-like perspective.