

Introduction

One of the exciting things about being a Christian is the way that God chooses to use us and to work with us in fulfilling his purposes. He is perfectly capable of managing on his own - he doesn't need us but he has chosen us to be his people and as such he wants us to co-operate with him in building his Kingdom. This can be demanding, it can also be immensely exciting and fulfilling. Our first lesson shows God working closely with his people to spread the Good News of salvation over new boundaries and it shows clearly the demands he makes on his followers and the rewards he gives them.

This is the story of how the Gospel was first taken beyond the boundaries of the Jewish nation and preached to non- Jews, who were known as Gentiles. God could have done it alone but it was important that he worked with his church because including the Gentiles in his church meant a radical rethink for the Jewish people of what God required of his people and what salvation involved.

At this point in the life of the early church Christianity seemed to be a kind of reformed Judaism rather than a new faith that replaced and went beyond the Jewish faith. The Jewish Christians looked to Jesus for their salvation but they were still bound by centuries of Jewish practice and belief.

They still looked upon the Jewish nation as God's chosen people and the ceremonial part of being God's chosen people was still very important to them. It was still unthinkable for non-Jews, who didn't observe the Jewish ceremonial laws such as the food laws and circumcision to be accepted as God's people. This was why, in spreading the Gospel to these people, God needed the co-operation of his church. It was no use God offering salvation to the whole world if they weren't accepted as part of his church by his people.

This needed a very radical change of thinking for the early Christians and so God used Peter, the rock on which he was to build his church, their clear leader, and showed him his purposes very clearly so there could be no mistake.

1) He spoke to Peter in a vision where he showed him that the Jewish fears about impurity were unfounded. If God chose to offer salvation to people they could not be unclean because God himself had cleansed

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them. The sheet Peter saw was filled with animals, some considered clean by the Jews and some considered unclean. There they were together, side by side with no divisions or distinctions, all now acceptable in God's eyes because of the cleansing renewing power of Jesus' death on the cross. The old ceremonial laws no longer applied to God's people. This sheet surely represents the church which will contain all races and classes without any distinctions at all.

God's command to Peter to kill and eat the animals is repeated three times. I think there are two reasons for this: firstly, the idea that the old divisions no longer apply is so new to Peter, so revolutionary that it takes several repetitions for him to absorb and understand its implications;

And secondly: God repeats his command so that there can be no possible doubt in Peter's mind. He wants him to be absolutely clear that Jesus's death on the cross is the only thing needed to make us acceptable to God. When we believe and trust in Christ there is nothing else needed for our salvation. This is a truth that we all know in our minds but are slow to translate into our lives in the way we think and act. We still make extra demands on ourselves and on others. But in the words of Peter's vision, "Do not make anything impure that God has made clean". I wonder if we are guilty of doing that today do we impose restrictions on who can and cannot come to Jesus? Do we extend the Good news to some people but withhold it from others?

Having enabled Peter to understand this fundamental foundation for Christianity God then commands him to act on it. He told him that there were three men who were about to arrive at the house where Peter was staying and he was to have no hesitation in going with them.

There is a big step isn't there between believing and understanding a truth and actually acting on it. Translating belief into action can be scary, especially when we are acting on what we believe God has said to us. It must have taken Peter a lot of courage to go to preach to this Roman centurion - and maybe that is why God's instructions to Peter were so clear. There have been times when I have thought I have heard God telling me to do or to say something and it can be difficult to act on it. I know that often when that happens I doubt myself, have I heard aright? Might I make a fool of myself if I do what I think God is asking me to? I don't know if you've ever experienced that but it can be difficult but we need to step out if we are to fully experience God's plans for us and others.

But if Peter had any doubts about what he was doing he must have felt reassured when he realised that God had gone before him and prepared the way for him. God had been working, not only in Peter, but also in Cornelius. Cornelius was a righteous, good man, well respected and obviously seeking God and so God arranged for him to have the help he needed. He told Peter to go to Cornelius. But he also spoke to Cornelius and told him where to find Peter and to send his servants to ask Peter to come to him. Cornelius was ready to hear what Peter had to say. He wanted to know how to find salvation, God had prepared his heart.

This is one of the exciting and reassuring things about working with God in preaching the Gospel. I don't think there is anything more depressing than telling the Gospel to someone whose ears and heart are closed, who simply aren't interested. There are times when that makes me feel desperate - because it is so important. But the Gospel can only be received by an open, prepared heart and mind.

On the other hand there are few more exciting experiences than having the opportunity to talk to someone who is open and seeking God, who has been prepared by the Holy Spirit to hear the Gospel. I can remember dropping round to see someone when I was a student nurse, we got talking about Jesus and my faith in him. It was wonderful to hear her say, "I was just wishing I had somebody to explain this to me." The feeling that God had prepared the ground for me and had taken me there to work with him in bringing this girl to faith in him was wonderful and reassuring.

It is God who works, who brings about faith and who enters someone's heart and so, as Peter was still speaking to Cornelius the Holy Spirit came upon him. Peter likened this experience to the experience he had had at Pentecost. He said, "The Holy Spirit came upon them as he had come upon us at the beginning. The Spirit was bringing new life to Cornelius and his household in a very real way. Confirming for Peter that it was part of his plan that all people everywhere should come to believe and trust in Christ. Peter recognised this and said, "can anyone keep these people from being baptised with water? They have received the Holy Spirit just as we have." He recognised that God was at work here, he couldn't deny it and he saw that baptising Cornelius with water was simply recognising and confirming what God had already done in him.

Peter was concerned to obey God. What God demanded of him went against everything he had learned, lived and believed as a Jew. Simply

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going to the house of a non-Jew was against everything he had been taught. But he heard the Spirit telling him to go and so he followed. He was also concerned to work where God was working - "If God gave them the same gift, as he gave us who believed in Jesus Christ, who was I to think that I could oppose God?"

This attitude is such a contrast to that of the other Jewish believers. They'd heard that the Gentiles had received God's word. They didn't respond joyfully. They were not thrilled to see God working powerfully. They criticized Peter saying, "You went into the house of an uncircumcised man and you ate with him?" Peter had stepped outside what they saw as good religious behaviour and they were shocked. The law was still very important to them. They seemed unable to let it go and simply trust in Jesus.

I wonder what would have happened to the early church if Peter had behaved in the same way; If he had clung to the old traditions and laws so that he couldn't see where God was working; If he had refused to courageously work where God was working. I think it would have shrivelled and died. It would have been just another Jewish sect without power to change or save because its dependence was on human actions and not on the power of the Holy Spirit.

This passage holds a very powerful message for us as the "Established Church". God is working today. He is preparing hearts to receive his word and he is pouring his Spirit out refreshing and renewing his people. We see this in the people who were recently confirmed and baptised and I see it so often when I meet people in the course of my ministry. God has been working in their hearts and minds and they are ready to hear the Good news of Jesus. God has done the preparation. He has changed people's hearts and he pours his spirit out. Our need is to be working where God is working. We need to be continually looking to see what God is doing and listening to hear what he wants from us. The danger is that we can be so busy doing what we think is important that we can miss what God thinks is important.