

## **All Saints Talk for Sunday 8<sup>th</sup> Sept 2024**

### **Spread the Word, Catch the Fire**

**‘Good news for everyone’** Paddy Gleave

*Peter explains his vision: Acts 11v1-18*

I was in London on 6 July 2007 the day it was announced it has won the bid for the 2012 Olympics. I remember seeing the newspapers on the tube emblazoned with the news and I felt the excitement. The next day in London saw the terrorist attacks on the tubes as some young men blew themselves up in the name of a radically, distorted and warped portrayal of Islam.

This profoundly affected me. For years afterwards whenever I went on a tube station and a young man with brown skin with a ruck sack go on the train, I felt fear. Something deep in me pushed me to dehumanise that individual, other them and potentially perceive them as a foe.

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This is Carl Schmitt. He lived between 1888 and 1985 and was a German political philosopher and member of the Nazi Party. He criticised parliamentary democracy and liberalism and he put forward a concept friend/enemy. He argued that any human group can only be held together if it has a common enemy. He is latching on to something – the tendency in us to other people who do not seem like us. Deeply embedded in our psyches is a pre-disposition to judge other people – are they in my tribe or not. This underpinned my feelings on those tube trains but if we’re honest we have a tendency to do this all the time whether we consciously realise it or not. We look at how people appear physically, how they talk and do we they follow the customs and practice of “our tribe.”

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A silly example but I think a settled custom in our culture is to queue. So, if we come across this I think we would be upset and deep down would consider those people not like us and other – not our tribe.

Naturally, the good news of Jesus touches all parts of who we are and has something to say about this othering. And this is at the heart of the passage today and is also one of the central issues of the New Testament.

So, in this part of Acts Peter has returned to Jerusalem to the early church leaders to let them know about a vision and what happened to him at Caesarea.

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Leading up to this is the expanding of the Jesus movement. Initially, it started in Jerusalem and moved out to the surrounding Judea but then grew in surprising ways for the first Jesus followers. We saw in Emma's talk a few weeks ago how it spread north to Samaria (an area whose people were viewed with suspicions and hostility by Jews like the first Jesus followers). It spread to the Israelites still in exile in the broader roman world – the diaspora.

Then a surprising, world view shaking event took place for these ethnic jews. Simon Peter had a remarkable vision, met a roman officer Cornelius, preached the good news and even while preaching the Holy Spirit fell on all those listening. The Jesus message was not just for the jews, those in Judea and Samaria, the Israelites still in exile abroad but also for the non jews – the Gentiles.

We see in Acts 11 what happened next. The Christian believers in Jerusalem heard what had happened and were upset. Peter came back to them to tell them what happened.

Why were they upset about Peter going into a Gentile house and eating with them? The Gentiles were seen as other, unclean. The Jewish faith had rituals and practices to clearly separate them from non jews - gentiles. Ethnic boundary markers in effect. You may know of some of them – food laws, sabbath, circumcision, being born into a Jewish family etc. By keeping these a jew demonstrated they were part of God's elect – a cut above the rest (which was actually the case for males!) The rituals and practices had been in place and practiced for centuries as the Jewish people waited for God to come and make things right, restore Israel and make all the other nations pay homage to Israel.

It's hard for us to appreciate how deep this was culturally embedded as a natural way of being. I gave the silly example of queuing etiquette and how not doing this is almost taken as offensive on a cultural level for us. Another thought that I had was the way Winston Churchill and events like Dunkirk have taken a mythological hold on our culture so to question them (even if speaking truth) often brings a sharp reaction. A few years ago the National Trust released a report about colonial connections and slavery which attracted much controversy in parts of the press because of some of the facts it gave about Winston Churchill and some of his actions as a politician.

So, it's understandable why the Jerusalem based Christians responded the way they did. Peter then told them what happened. He was staying in Joppa and whilst praying he went into a trance and had a vision. He saw a big sheet being lowered from heaven in the sheet he saw animals, reptiles and birds. A voice then told him to slaughter and eat and three times Peter refused because to do so would make him unclean under the Mosaic laws. At that point messengers from Cornelius came and the Holy Spirit told Peter to go with them. Peter then goes to Caesarea and Cornelius tells him about the visit he had from the angel telling him to bring Peter so that he and his household can be saved.

So God is taking the initiative here in preparing Peter for this encounter and has taken the initiative in promoting Cornelius to call for Peter to hear the Gospel. Interesting Peter does not name Cornelius in his account, and I think this was because he wants the focus to be on Jesus and not the personalities. Peter then says how the Holy Spirit came in dramatic and recognisable fashion.

So, Peter says that as they had received the Holy Spirit and being baptised, they were now part of God's family so he should accept their hospitality and eat with them. I love what happens next. One translation says that those listening were silent! Have you ever had those moments when God has shown you something new, altered your perspective or you've heard someone anointed speak prophetically.

How were they going to respond? To their credit they managed to let centuries of cultural practice fall away – they praised God and acknowledged that Gentiles can respond to God and be led to new life in him.

So, the restoration of Israel long hoped for was not about Israel being reconstituted as a nation state it was bigger restoration to God's kingdom to all nations – the very vision of Abraham as a father to all nations. A spiritual Israel found and constituted within the community of believers.

The big move was not just the food laws were no longer a barrier but gentiles themselves are not unclean and are not kept at arm's length from God's plan.

As NT Wright said in a letter to the Spectator.

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“The church was the original multicultural project, with Jesus as its only point of identity. It was known, and was for this reason seen as both attractive and dangerous, as a worship-based, spiritually renewed, multi-ethnic, polychrome, mutually supportive, outward-facing, culturally creative, chastity-celebrating, socially responsible fictive kinship group, gender-blind in leadership, generous to the poor and courageous in speaking up for the voiceless.”

So, what do we make of this.

- 1) God takes the initiative preparing and shaping who we are and at the same time shaping other to be receptive to how he will use us to minister to them. The Holy Spirit comes when people respond to the message that Jesus is King and in him is salvation. We don't do this in our strength.

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I think you know that I lead the CPAS Pathfinder Broads Cruise (a Christian sailing holiday for teenagers). When I first became leader, I used to think we had to get everything right in terms of

music, preaching etc to get people to respond to a Gospel call. However, I began to see that this is not the case. There is no magic formula you use – God takes the initiative and will do things in his way (which is always for the best). This year on the Broads Cruise we were running out of time in an evening meeting and I said to God you've got 10 minutes to do anything you'd like to do because I then need to get people to go back to their boats. A leader then stood up and said that if anyone wants prayer to come forward and as one virtually the entire room responded and those 10 minutes were astonishing!

2) We need to continually challenge ourselves as to whether we are othering other people – seeing them as not of our tribe. God reaches out to all – let's not see any human being as unclean but as made in the image of God who he longs to know. I think I will say this too. Be wary in particular of politicians, those of influence in our society and leaders who blame problems on people who are different to you – it is so easy for them to appeal to these deep-rooted tribal tendencies. Be shrewd and careful with what you let influence you – what you put into your mind. I recognise the need for God to work in me afresh to change how I react when I am on tube trains and see a young lad get on with a rucksack.

3) We need to ask the Holy Spirit to prompt and challenge us about structures, practices, ways we do things in our church which create barriers (like the Jews had to mark out gentiles as different). We need to try hard to avoid creating cliques and in-crowds in church and pay special attention to those on the edge. I always found Sarah Couchman inspirational in this regard – what a lovely, kind, inclusive woman she is. We must also be open to people raising issues about something that it is not right – the past years have seen too many stories where power in churches has gone wrong and those wronged by pastors not being believed.

4) We're part of a big rescue plan and God involves us. His kingdom is advancing and there are no places or peoples who are off limits. The Gospel is transformative and the Holy Spirit changes how people think and behave – making them new humans (which is the best thing)! Our inspiration for Mission is to know that the Holy Spirit is wanting to reconcile,

restore and transform – which is good for all humans. We as the church are advanced sign of the Kingdom that will fully come when God will restore and make all things new.

5) Eating and hospitality is a core part of the life of Christian communities. It should be a unifying symbol of all coming together to eat at the same time. Whether that is communion or the community service. Our faith is earthy and rooted.

6) Finally, expect to be challenged by the Holy Spirit. To have pre-conceptions turned upside down like Peter. For God to open your eyes to deep, beautiful truths. This can be scary and sometimes the proper response to having this experience is to be silent....and then praise God!

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