

### **A Radical Welcome (Acts 11:1-18)**

*Peter was in trouble! He had spent time at someone's house that was not a Jew. For the Jewish Christians in Jerusalem this was scandalous! So, when Peter returns to Jerusalem he explains what had happened and how God was calling them to a radical new way of thinking about the world.*

### **Why all the fuss about who you eat with?**

Partygate and more recently Beergate have dominated our news over the last few months.

When you describe the stories out of context you might wonder what all the fuss is about?

People are outraged that Boris Johnson had a birthday cake with a number of guests in his house on his birthday.

Keir Starmer had a beer and curry with some colleagues whilst preparing for a local election.

In normal circumstances neither event would pass without comment, they would just be seen as normal events in the run of life. Yet, when we know the whole story, the big picture or context we can understand what all the fuss is about. These events happened during a Pandemic when there were laws in place to stop people mixing together outside their household. Both events arguably were law-makers breaking the law at a time when many others were making huge sacrifices to keep those same laws. Given that context the events take on a far greater significance, although the details of whether laws were actually broken is of course still under debate - especially in the case of Keir Starmer.

Chapter 11 of Acts tells us that Peter has returned to Jerusalem after spending a long time travelling further afield telling people the good news about Jesus, who had risen from the dead and was offering salvation to all who believed. However, for the Christians in Jerusalem who were all Jews, Peter's ministry had become controversial, because he had started preaching that same message to those who were not Jews and in particular had stayed in their houses and probably eaten with them.

So in verse 3, Peter is accused of 'going into the house of uncircumcised men (that is non-Jewish men) and eating with them.' For us that seems like they are making a fuss about nothing, but we need to understand the cultural context and the background they were coming from.

### **The Wrong Division: Unclean, Clean and Saved**

In particular we need to see how the very first Christians would have viewed the world.

#### **The Old Division: Clean and Unclean**

They would have divided the world into two groups, Jew and Gentile or clean and unclean. To be a part of the people of God you needed to be ceremonially clean according to the Law of God, that is you would have been circumcised - if you were a man - and would have taken seriously the Jewish rules and regulations on remaining clean and unclean. In particular the rules about which animals could be eaten and which animals could not be eaten, the animals labelled clean in the Old Testament Law, such as cows, sheep and goats and those labelled unclean such as pigs and shell fish.

Such rules were God given religious identity markers - ways of showing who the true people of God were. Yet it meant that in practice Jew would refuse to eat with non-Jews for fear of becoming unclean.

#### **The New Division: Saved and Unsaved**

Yet, for the Christian Jews, another division had now happened, one brought about by the person of Jesus. This was a division between those who were saved and those who were not saved.

With Jesus's death and subsequent resurrection, they had realised, as Peter makes clear in Acts 2, that Jesus was both Lord and Messiah. He was God's chosen king, the Son of God.

This was also confirmed by the sending of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost on Jesus's followers, a kind of Divine confirmation that the first Jewish followers of Jesus, were the true people of God, because they had accepted Jesus to be God's Messiah and Lord.

Indeed, Peter in his first sermon quotes from Joel and Old Testament prophet that describes the coming of the Holy Spirit on all God's people. The end of the quote says:

"And everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved." (Joel 2:32; Acts 2:31).

Peter and the earliest Christians realised that Jesus was the Lord and those who called on him, his disciples or followers were the ones who were truly saved. They were the ones who believed in Jesus, the ones who had repented and found forgiveness of sins and the gift of eternal life.

Yet, not all Jews had accepted that - after all many of the Jewish leaders had been behind Jesus's crucifixion, so were unlikely to accept that they had God's Messiah killed. Thus increasingly it was clear that from a Christian point of view the Jews were split between those who believed in Jesus and were saved and those who rejected him and were not saved.

### **Salvation for Jews only**

Yet, to start with at least, when they said, 'everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved,' they thought the 'everyone' referred to 'everyone who was clean,' that is every Jew. Jesus after all was the Jewish Messiah, a Jew himself, and all Twelve apostles were Jews themselves. Surely, you could only be saved by the Jewish Messiah if you were already a Jew.

So, the very first Christians saw the world as a three-way division, the Gentiles or unclean, the Jews or clean who didn't believe and were not saved and the Jews who did believe and were saved. The coming of Jesus had certainly changed their view of the world and how it was divided up, but they still believed in the distinction between clean and unclean, between Jew and Gentile, that the Old Testament religious markers of the Old Testament people of God: circumcision and the food laws, were still relevant.

Yet, Peter had broken those rules. He had eaten with Cornelius a non-Jew. For the Jews in Jerusalem, this felt a bit like Party-gate. So when he arrived in Jerusalem, Peter had to explain himself.

### **Interpreting the Event: Another Pentecost**

Peter's re-telling of the story, which you can read at far greater length in chapter 10 of Acts is useful, because it doesn't just repeat the facts, it helps us see how Peter was interpreting the events to help persuade his fellow Jewish Christians that he was right to eat with Cornelius.

Whilst chapter 10 tells us what God did and what Peter did, Peter's explanation in chapter 11, is Peter explaining to those who believed Gentiles were unclean, how he had come to change his mind with God's guidance.

**The Problem: Ritual Cleanness**

Firstly, Peter does not begin in the same place as Acts 10. In Acts 10, Luke begins with the angel coming to Cornelius, but Peter begins with the vision God showed him. This is where God deals with the key issue for Peter.

In the vision, a blanket full of unclean animals is lowered down and Peter is commanded to kill and to eat. Peter as a Jew keen to follow the Jewish ritual rules on cleanness refuses, but God responds: "Do not call anything unclean that God has declared clean."

God seems to be declaring that the old laws around ritual uncleanness were no longer relevant. God had a new way of declaring things clean.

Just as the laws that restricted our freedom because of the Pandemic were appropriate and in place for a time, they have now come to an end. We are now in a new era, where the threat of the disease is not strong enough to justify restricting people's freedom to meet and congregate. So the law have been dropped.

In the same way, what God had shown Peter in Acts 10, was that the old Jewish laws around clean and unclean were no longer relevant now that Jesus had come. This was a new era, a new covenant or testament was in place. Now, the Law of the Spirit had superseded the Law of Moses, now Gentiles could be a part of the people of God, without first becoming a Jew. Peter eating with Cornelius was not breaking God's laws, because those laws were no longer relevant.

**The Proof: Combined Witnesses**

But how could they be sure about that?

Because God provided three separate witnesses to show that Peter should be with Cornelius. This is really important. The Bible says that in order for something to be proved you need two or more witnesses.

The first witness was the vision Peter had, which is confirmed by the almost immediate arrival of messengers from Cornelius summoning him to his house in Caesarea. A summons that is further confirmed by the Holy Spirit's guidance to Peter.

Then when he arrives at Cornelius's house, he hears that Cornelius has also received a vision of an angel who knew where Peter was and told him to summon him. Two separate visions, that both encouraged the same encounter at the same time. This seemed to be a double witness to the fact that God was bringing them together.

Then arguably there is a third witness. As Peter begins to explain the good news about Jesus to Cornelius and his household all of who were Gentiles, the Holy Spirit comes down on them and they start speaking in tongues, in a way very similar to the way it had happened to Peter and the Jewish followers at Pentecost.

Each event by themselves could be argued to be made up by one person or a strange happening, but the combination of events gives a cast-iron guarantee that this was from God. Peter and the Jewish Christians with him at the time were at least persuaded that the old laws around clean and unclean were no longer relevant.

**The Point:**

And the point was this for Peter. Before he had ascended to heaven, Jesus had said in Acts 1:5:  
"For John baptised with water,  
but in a few days you will be baptised with the Holy Spirit." (Acts 1:5)

The mark of those who belonged to Jesus was that they were given the Holy Spirit. In his Pentecost sermon, Peter had realised that this pouring out of the Spirit on God's people was a fulfilment of Joel's prophecy, the prophecy that ended with the statement:

"And everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved." (Joel 2:32; Acts 2:31).

If God was repeating Pentecost with Cornelius a non-Jew, then the implication was that the 'everyone' was not just restricted to Jews, it was literally everyone, Jew and Gentile.

The old way of looking at the world was no longer relevant. The old Jewish religious markers of the people of God: circumcision and food laws were no longer relevant now Christ had come and fulfilled the Law. Now it was those who called on the name of Jesus and so received the Spirit who were the true people of God.

Peter was not wrong to eat with Cornelius, the old rules were no longer relevant. Partygate was explained.

**A Radical Welcome:**

Yet, this was not just about defending Peter's actions, this was about confirming a radical new perspective that goes to the heart of what Christianity is all about.

The radical welcome of Cornelius draws out the full implications of what Jesus had achieved through his death and resurrection and the sending of the Spirit.

**1. Radical Salvation**

First of all it underlines the radical nature of salvation through Jesus. Cornelius was told by the angel that Peter would bring him a message through which he would be saved and it was as Peter was preaching that the Holy Spirit was poured out on Cornelius and his household, in a way that fulfilled the Joel prophecy and so showed they were saved.

In other words, you did not have to be clean - in terms of the Old Testament Jewish regulations in order to be saved or receive the Holy Spirit. You were saved merely by hearing the message about Jesus and responding to it with repentance and faith.

Yes, that change of heart will show itself in terms of changed moral behaviour. The moral laws of the Old Testament were still relevant. After further debate on this issue in Acts 15, the church agrees that Christians do not need to be circumcised, but they do call them to steer clear of idolatry and sexual immorality two areas where Biblical morals and the morals of the ancient world differed most markedly.

Yet, salvation comes instantly with faith in Christ and commitment to live his way, the good works flow from salvation, they do not achieve it. This is radical salvation.

Let's be careful not to suggest or require that anything beyond faith in Christ and repentance is needed for salvation.

**2. Radical Church**

Secondly, this shows us that the church is a radical new community where the only identity that matters is to belong to Christ. All other identities become irrelevant to membership of the church. Paul expounded this in Galatians by saying,

"There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus." (Galatians 3:28)

There will be people within the church who are radically different to you. If you have really grasped the difference Christ makes, this is something that should be celebrated as showing the incredible unity we have in Christ.

### **3. Radical Invitation**

Thirdly, this reminds us that the invitation to come and follow Jesus is a radical invitation, because no-one should be left out of that invitation. It is easy to think that only people like us can become Christians or to imagine that whole groups of people should not really ever be invited to become Christians.

Yes, different groups may require different approaches, but no-one is outside of Christ's invitation to salvation.

Ironically, in the light of our passage, today in an attempt to avoid anti-semitism, telling Jews about Jesus is often frowned upon. Yet, Jews are just as much invited to turn to Jesus as anyone else.

### **Conclusion:**

Peter concludes his talk by saying, "... who was I to stand in God's way." If we make salvation about more than faith and repentance or fail to welcome or invite people that are different to us into the church, then the reality is we are standing in God's way.

That's not a place I would like to stand!