

ACTS 11: 1-18 Peter and the Gentiles

18 May 2019, StJN

Father, may we have ears to listen, minds to understand, and hearts to receive your word to us. Amen.

Have you ever had to change your mind about anything? have you ever had to give up some deeply held opinion that you finally realise was wrong? If you have, it's probably quite a healthy sign, that you are open, aware and listening, and not stuck in a rut!

When our Tristan decided that he wanted his hair long, we had quite a struggle with that. To our eyes, he looked a bit of a mess for one thing. When the long hair turned into dreadlocks, that was perhaps even worse. I remember walking through Keighley with him and seeing people look at him, and knowing, because of my own prejudices at the time, that they would be thinking he was some undesirable character, and almost wanting to scream at them 'Don't judge him by his appearance!' But we're all inclined to do that – first impressions and all that sort of thing. I had to learn not to do that. Now when I see some long-haired young man in town, probably with outsize clothes and looking a bit scruffy, I understand that inside there is a new creation, a lad just trying to express who he feels he really is rather than just conform to 'what everyone expects.'

When my Mum started having a carer live in with her, they were nearly all 'big black Mommas' who were sent, most of them lovely, warm, caring ladies who had known real difficulties in their own lives. But my poor Mum was truly frightened of them, and went to bed half expecting to be murdered in the night. She once asked me, "How can I walk down the street with one of these? What will people think?" Poor Mum, but she was not alone in that generation.

And you don't have to be of my Mum's generation, either. When I was on Skye the other week, the speaker, who is younger than me, spoke of his early years growing up on the Hebridean island of Lewis. He never saw a black face in real life. There just weren't any on Lewis. He told us that it was only when he went to the mainland as a young man that he realised he was racist. The ideas in his head about black people were well and truly ingrained, and were completely wrong! When he actually met people and got to know them, he had to let his mind and his attitudes be changed.

And that's what happened to Peter through his meeting with Cornelius and his friends. They were Gentiles. They didn't belong with Jews. They were uncircumcised and therefore outside the love and care of the one true God. They were unclean, and God didn't have anything to do with them, so neither did the Jews. Or so they thought. It's interesting to note how passionate and sure of himself Peter is! He has this vision, and hears a voice from heaven, we are told, - so clearly Peter realised that this was God's doing. And still he has the brass neck to say 'Oh no! God! I can't do that!' (even though he realises that this is God's command. 'I've never eaten anything ritually unclean or defiled in all my life – and I'm not going to start now! Even though you are telling me to change my mind about all this!' No wonder God has to send the vision three times before Peter finally begins to get the point. Peter had grown up with the certain knowledge that some foods and animals were unclean and he must not touch them. Now God appears to be turning that deeply held belief on its head.

Fortunately for us, Peter does listen, and this episode in the life of Peter and the life of the church marks a real turning point in the history of humankind, but it is a lesson that has to be learned anew in each generation.

The Jews were exclusive, very protective of their status, of their role as God's chosen people; they were especially favoured by God – or so they believed.

Here God reveals to Peter that Jesus has blown apart that sense of exclusivity and that God pours his Holy Spirit on people of other nations too, as a sign that they are all loved by God, equally.

In the letter to the Ephesians (ch.3), St *Paul* reveals how he has made the same discovery. He writes about God's secret plan: "In past times mankind was not told this secret, but God has revealed it now by the Spirit to his holy apostles and prophets. The secret is that by means of the gospel the Gentiles have a part with the Jews in God's blessings; they are members of the same body and share in the promise that God made through Christ Jesus."

A Gentile was anyone who was not a Jew. So this is great news for the likes of us. We, as Gentiles, now know that we have a share in God's blessings. The narrow religion of Judaism has had its doors opened wide to let in those who were hitherto regarded as unclean. Well, that's what should have happened in theory.

As we know, Judaism continued on its own path, even though many Jews recognised in Jesus a new way forward; Jesus revealed the openhearted love of God, his welcome to those who were deemed to be outside the law. Many Jews could not accept this. So we still have division between Jews and Christians. I'm quite certain that was not what Jesus intended or anticipated. I really don't believe Jesus came to set up another religion. He came to help people to discover the love of God for THEM.

But, as Gentiles, we can rejoice, because the message of this episode is that we do not hold the reins of God's Holy Spirit: the

Spirit is free to work where it will, and it works wherever there is a heart ready to receive it, regardless of race, gender or even creed.

Sadly though, we humans always seem to want to assert our own exclusivity. It really was not long before the Christian church did just what the Jews had done: they rejoiced in their status as God's people, and then began to assume that everyone outside the church did NOT enjoy that status. We do like to be special, don't we? There is something in us that likes to feel that we are a bit different, perhaps a bit better than others. Our rugby team is better than theirs. Yorkshiremen have something that others don't. Country dwellers have more common sense than townies. You might remember that Flanders and Swann song 'The English, the English, the English are best! I wouldn't give tuppence for all of the rest.' Spoken in jest, maybe, but haven't we heard something of that attitude in some of the Brexit talk?

Most of the Christian denominations have something of a 'them' and 'us' attitude: you're either a Christian or you are not, and that means you are either 'in', and on your way to heaven, or you are 'out' – and it's bad news for you. If you're a Roman Catholic, you might not accept that any other denomination is really Christian, and therefore really 'saved'. Equally, some strict Protestant groups regard Roman Catholics as unchristian, with a stronger allegiance to the Pope in Rome than to the Lord Jesus.

And what about other faiths? Are they unclean? Or might God's Spirit be at work in them also? Can we see God at work in unexpected people and places? Are we looking to see God at work there? As a church, how might we feel about a gay couple joining us for worship? How welcoming would we be to a charismatic black person? Gerald and I once went to the New Testament Church of God in Bradford, which was an all black congregation.

The ladies of congregation arrived in great finery: smart dresses in bright and vibrant colours, huge headwear.

The preacher preached for an hour. He had no notes, and he leapt about the church, hardly in one spot for more than a minute or two. He used great gesticulations, and his tone of voice went from the quiet and intimate to the great roar of warning, or shout of praise. His sermon was regularly punctuated but loud cries of 'Amen!' or 'Alleluia!' from the congregation. It was really quite a spectacle. I seem to remember that what he said was good, but sadly what struck me was the performance rather than the message. It was all so very different from St John's on a Sunday morning. Yet there was a warmth and a power in that service – and interestingly that preacher is now a canon of Bradford Cathedral. Treasures in unexpected places. God's Spirit clearly at work in those we might think very different from ourselves. God's Spirit working in ways we might not predict.

So let's keep asking ourselves what are our prejudices? Where are our blind spots? Where might God be at work in those around us right now, in ways we have not yet understood? How might God be wanting to change us, our attitudes and opinions? Notice that Peter has this vision while he was praying, while he was consciously paying attention to God, while he was listening, while he was in a state of openness to God's Spirit. And mostly, I believe, that is when we are changed – when we give God the opportunity to break down in us what needs to be removed, and to reinforce in us what needs to be preserved and nurtured, for his name's sake. Amen.