

Acts 10:1-38 – *Radical Inclusion*

The journey from cultural religion to Christianity is both an exciting and a challenging one. It is exciting because humanity is eager to preserve and conserve what is considered religious ideals. On the other hand, it is challenging in that, when religious humanity is encountered by God or an overwhelming, yet gentle power, the resistance turns into acceptance.

The people of Israel were called to be separate from other nations. One of the themes in the Hebrew Bible is that Israel was God's chosen people, and they were not to be like the people around them. This separateness was a defining characteristic (or was supposed to be) of a holy people. This specialness was not intended to promote the exclusion and condemnation of people based on national origin. This nation was to be a holy priesthood for the sake of the world.

God's chosen people were unique in that they were included in the covenant God made at Mount Sinai. More than lineage, it was this covenantal community that made the nation separate. People were born into the nation, but it was the covenant, represented by the Torah, and fulfilled by obedience to it, that made them part of God's community, God's kingdom.

However, like with many differences between people, this distinction became clearly about "us" versus "them." In our time, we see many divisions related to race, nationality, immigration status, gender identity,

sexual orientation, political views, and most other differences we humans can distinguish (or create).

The verse from Acts: “*Cornelius, a centurion, a devout man who feared God with all his household, gave alms liberally to the people and prayed constantly to God*”, is a mountaintop message in Acts. The message of inclusion of all peoples, nations, ethnicities, man and women into the fellowship of God’s people comes into play.

The ripple effects of being engaged and encountering God are evident not only to Christian believers, but also to characters such as Peter, whose role and function in the ministry of God, the Son and the Holy Spirit is to advance the mission of the Church. Peter’s vision is a narrative of conversion and of Peter’s own transformation to the way God loves and invites all people into Kingdom work. Jew-Gentile relations are not human work but God’s work, and this is a mystery to Peter who confirms to his audience that “*God shows no partiality*”.

During this time, God was working to open the doors of salvation to all creation. Peter experienced the revelation that he should not call anything God created unclean, as had become the Jewish practice. It is here that Peter affirms that the gates of salvation are open to everyone, leading not only to a significant change in Peter’s own life, but also a massive shift in the trajectory of the church’s mission in its earliest days.

This story is a key event in the life of the early church. Jesus was the

Jewish Messiah, the fulfilment of the promises God made to the chosen, Jewish, people. The first followers of Jesus were Jewish. Christianity (before it was so named) was a Jewish movement. But, the question was: what about the Gentiles? Would this Jesus movement be marked by exclusion or inclusion?

This story is a powerful symbol of a promise enunciated from the beginning of Luke's gospel and throughout Acts, a promise represented most powerfully in the resurrection of Jesus. Without question, God's spirit is moving. The only question is whether Peter, as well as the church, will sense the winds of change and follow God's lead.

Peter's vision, which sets in motion events leading to the inclusion of Gentiles among the followers of Jesus, is the most important turning point in the book of Acts, and in the story of the early church. Because of these events, those of us who are Gentiles are welcomed into a relationship with the God of Israel.

However, none of this is a foregone conclusion, and for Jesus' first followers, it would have been unthinkable that salvation would be offered to Gentiles. After Pentecost the mission of God does begin to expand: first to the detested people of Samaria; then to the Ethiopian eunuch, a marginal member of the people of Israel, but the idea that this mission would go beyond these groups would be far from Peter's mind.

The story emphasizes that this transformation was not orchestrated or even desired by the disciples; rather, it was God who was behind it all. God's desire for the Gentiles to be included in the salvation brought by Christ moves all the action in this story. Peter struggles to catch up with what God is doing, and to overcome his resistance to the unimaginable change unfolding.

This pericope is often called "the conversion of Cornelius", but it could equally be called, "the conversion of Peter", since, in the space of four days, Peter's entire world view is transformed. Those who encounter the disciples describe them as "turning the world upside down", but in doing so the disciples' own world gets upended by the Holy Spirit.

For Peter, the transformation begins with a vision of clean and unclean animals being lowered from heaven, being told to eat them, refusing, and hearing a voice telling him that what God has made clean he must not call profane. This command violates the laws he has been taught, so he is puzzled and cannot stop thinking about the vision. His world is shifting, but he does not yet understand what God is about. Then strangers, Gentiles, appear at his door, sent by the Spirit, summoning him to come speak to the Gentile centurion Cornelius. Here Peter does something amazing: he invites these messengers into his home. Already a mingling of Jew and Gentile is happening, people being together against the strictures of the culture. Peter is starting to change; already the vision is working on him.

A next step toward transformation happens when Peter enters Cornelius's house. Even as he declares that this boundary-crossing is "unlawful", Peter quotes the voice from his vision telling him not to call anything unclean. This is another leap in Peter's understanding: he discerns that God's message is connected to the otherwise baffling fact that he is standing in a Gentile home. Peter is starting to get it, but still he asks, "why did you send for me?"

Once Peter hears Cornelius' story, he arrives at a new insight, best translated as: "I am beginning to grasp that God shows no partiality." It is dawning on him that these righteous Gentiles might deserve to have the Gospel preached to them, which he proceeds to do, and that they might believe in Christ and so receive the forgiveness of sins. But it still does not occur to him that they could become part of the church.

The most shocking part of this story is what happens next: Peter stays with Cornelius for several days. This intimacy with Gentiles would have been unthinkable to him a few days earlier; accepting their hospitality is the consummate sign of the great shift that has happened.

So the vision was not at all about food or about what one can or cannot eat. The vision was about **people**. Peter - or any of us - can no longer deem to call "unclean" or "profane" or "unworthy of our community" or "unwelcome" those whom God has already made clean. It might be tempting to judge Peter at this point for not being open enough to God's

inclusive love, but to condemn him is to condemn ourselves.

The extended and complex narrative around the encounter of Peter and the centurion Cornelius is a critical turning point in our narrative. The communities God wishes to draw together are wildly diverse and wildly inclusive. Gentiles and Greeks are welcome to join this community without leaving behind their cultural particularities. God welcomes the peoples and nations of the world in the midst of, not despite of, their ethnic particularities. In essence, God is not composing a generic people devoid of cultural uniqueness, but a community teeming with difference. The encounter between Peter and Cornelius inaugurates the early church's living into this God-sanctioned reality.

It is indeed the call of the church to retell this narrative of God's embrace of outsiders and all ethnic peoples who are included in the mission of God. The entire narrative of the book of Acts is about God's mission. The Holy Spirit is behind all that happens in Acts, and consequently in the Church.

It seems natural to read this as a story about Peter's conversion and transformation, but when we read in the context of the 21st century church, the narrative summons both laity and clergy to a conversion of heart, soul and mind. Like Peter, 21st century Christians seem to have difficulties welcoming and accepting outsiders into the fellowship of God. Simply put, this story is a challenging but fascinating message to all who

claim to be serving God and all who are part of the Church. Our accepting of 'others' is indeed a form of witnessing to the Good news of Jesus Christ.

The character of God as an impartial God now means that the character of God's community is impartial. The dividing lines separating Jew and Gentile based on who is clean and who is not according to the law have been obliterated. Our acceptability is expressed through our actions. Faith is active, not passive. Luke was a well-educated Greek who had embraced this theology because it was logical. Education and logic go hand in hand. Coupled with God's Holy Spirit working in him, Luke went to great lengths to pass his witness to all generations.

This radical new divine inclusivity is expressed in the phrase "*every nation*". That same phrase was used in the Pentecost story where pious Jews from "every nation" had gathered in Jerusalem. There "every nation" was the geographical home for pious Jews. Now, however, "every nation" includes the pious and righteous people whom God finds acceptable, be they Jew or be they Gentile, and includes all nations, cultures, ethnic groups - not just those that come from pious Jewish communities or nations.

It is God's initiative that sets Peter, Cornelius and the church to this monumental juncture. It is this early community who sees its identity shifted by God's Spirit. In short, this really is a story of the transformation

of a church which had missed the subtle but powerful ways God was moving.

Perhaps the same is happening in our community today if we just have the imagination and inspiration to take notice. Where is God's Spirit moving the church today? Do we see God calling us away from our guarded kingdoms into the world, to all people, to all communities, to *every nation*? Just imagine what enormous change in attitude and outlook had to happen among Jesus' followers when they stopped being that closed, exclusive group and started to grow into a community that included people of all cultures and ethnic groups with no exclusions? It wasn't easy - but this was God's plan all along.

Like Peter, we are called to be missionaries to others and we should also be open to be missionized by others. Like the Gentile Churches of Peter's time, the Holy Spirit came upon believing Gentiles, and the Spirit is already at work on outsiders. The Global South or African, Asian, Latin and South American Pentecostal Christians are a good example. The Holy Spirit shows no partiality in that all believers from all over the world are able to receive the Holy Spirit, and be drawn into God's mission.

As we continue to celebrate the resurrection, it may be appropriate for the church to consider how the Spirit may be moving amongst us in unexpected and challenging ways and to ask how the reverberations of the resurrection continue to be manifested all around us.

The question for us is whether we are open to being so radically changed as Peter was. Can we pay attention to the voice of the spirit, even when it is telling us to do something unimaginable, to widen the boundaries of our communities beyond what we are comfortable with to give and receive hospitality with those who seem much too “other” for us to consider communion with them?

God’s impartiality, as Peter says, should be read as one of the criteria of worshipping God in a diversified world. The message we discern from the Acts reading is that God’s good news is open to all people. God, regardless of people, is able to call any religious/cultural people into Christian fellowship.

Alleluia! Christ is risen!