

Cornelius and Peter

Acts 10: 1-8, 19-29a, 44-48

In spring 2020, we were due to go to Spring Harvest, the Christian conference, as participants and also as ‘nannies’ for our two young grandchildren. Well, that wasn’t to be, but we did look at some of the online sessions, and the theme has come back into my mind recently, because it does seem fitting for our times, even though, as you know, conference themes are decided years in advance. The theme was ‘The Church Unleashed’, the Acts church today.

Having just celebrated Pentecost, it is appropriate for us to look at how the early church went forwards from that point in the power of the Holy Spirit. The church was ‘unleashed’ then for the first time, and Beki Rogers in a Spring Harvest book talks about all the different things this could mean. The church is unleashed to be family, to be servant, to be a herald, to be an organisation, to be a sign, to be disciples and most of all it is unleashed in power – the power of the Holy Spirit. That’s quite a lot of aspects that the people of the early church were having to work out, and in Acts we can see how their concerns ranged back and forth, from pastoral care, to practical arrangements to theological debate, as they worked out what God was calling them to do in new ways.

We can see some of this happening in our church in London too, called Brentford Free Church. It has been said many times over the last year that the church has not been closed, even if we have not been able to meet in our buildings, and we know that God’s spirit has been active. Premier Christian News reported a survey which found that 1 in 4 people engaged in some form of online Christian worship during the first lockdown, and some of those were not churchgoers or believers, which is just one sign of God’s activity during the pandemic. However, in our church, as we expand our in-person worship and open our building to activities again, there is a feeling of the church being ‘unleashed’. We know that some things have changed irreversibly, and we cannot just go back to how things were before. A few weeks ago we had a service of lament in which we acknowledged what we had lost over the last 18 months – people, time with family and friends, groups, holidays, education, work, money, you can think of more. I thought it would be a miserable service, but it was actually a very freeing experience, which enabled me to accept the past and look forward to the next stage in our church life with hope and anticipation. We have been shaken out of complacency, and it’s up to us how we respond to this new season.

In Acts Chapter 10 we see the church responding to a new situation through two men who experienced turning points in their lives – Cornelius and Peter. I’m going to consider Cornelius and then Richard will consider Peter. In verse 1 we learn that Cornelius was a Roman soldier, a gentile, BUT in verse 2 he is described in surprisingly glowing terms – as devout, God-fearing, giving generously to those in need and praying regularly. A description we probably would not mind being applied to us. Commentators tell us that the term ‘God-fearing’ was used to describe people who followed Jewish practices, and beliefs to some extent, but were not full converts.

Yet, an angel spoke to Cornelius in a vision, and in verses 3 and 4 we see that this encounter had similarities to other angelic appearances in the New Testament – the angel addressed him by name, and made him afraid. Luke says that Cornelius 'distinctly saw an angel', emphasising the reality of this experience. In verse 4 the angel acknowledged the value of how far Cornelius has come in his search for faith. It's interesting that the angel did not point out where Cornelius was lacking, and neither did the angel share the good news of the gospel there and then. But he told him what he should do to take the next step in his faith, which was to make contact with Peter, a person Cornelius had never heard of.

This is an amazing example of God working behind the scenes. Cornelius' heart and mind may have been open to God for a long time, even years. And when the time was right God sent his angel and initiated the meeting with Peter. We can be sure God has been working in people's hearts during this last year and a half and that He has plans in which we have a part to play. It has been suggested that people like Cornelius, who are open to hear about Jesus, are like good soil in the parable of the sower. Now that the church is unleashed in new ways, our challenge is to respond when God sends people to us, whether that is in our church buildings, homes, families or workplaces. Working in the power of the Holy Spirit we are able to meet people where they are now, and the consequences may not only be that *they* are changed, but that *we* are too. Cornelius was changed by an angelic visit, which led to him meeting Peter, and Richard is now going to look at what happened to Peter.

You could say that Peter is riding on the crest of a wave – it is post-Pentecost, he has survived clashes with the leading Jewish leaders, in fact in Act 9, the previous chapter, we read that *the churches throughout Judea, Galilee and Samaria were now left in peace, building themselves up*. In the seaport of Caesarea, Cornelius the centurion has a heavenly messenger. But nearby in Joppa, Peter is pulled up short by another heavenly message.

If you are familiar with the story, then you'll have noticed that what Liz read omitted some parts of what is quite a long chapter. As well as Peter's later speech, we missed out the details of Peter's vision: that vision is of a sheet coming down from heaven laden with all sorts of animals which Peter is told to kill and eat, in spite of his protestations of remaining ritually clean, and after being given the message three times over – surely Peter's favourite number! - Peter learns not to call anything impure that God has made clean.

Peter knows that God has shown him that it's not just about food, it is people that should not be classed as unclean or impure, and with the coincidental arrival of the messengers from Cornelius, he realises that God treats all people alike, that "God is pleased with everyone who worships him and does right, no matter what nation they come from." (CEV)

For Peter this is another crucial step in his life as a disciple. Pentecost had seen him preach to the gathered diaspora in Jerusalem. Jews from around the world, joining with the local population. People who he could relate to, with the same religious background and culture. People he could be comfortable with, even if he was an uneducated fisherman. Gentiles on the other hand, were, if you excuse the expression, quite a different kettle of fish. But here the message of the vision that Peter sees is rammed home by the subsequent outpouring of the Holy Spirit on gentile Cornelius and his family and friends.

It was a huge transformational change because now the church was going to expand tremendously – the church unleashed – now it would become almost entirely Gentile. Yet, at times, even Peter struggled with its implications, and we hear through Paul's letter to the Galatians, that in a moment of weakness Peter yielded to peer pressure to treat Gentile and Jewish Christians differently.

But what about the church today? I hope you will allow me to relate a local story from our church in London.

This year Brentford Free Church has been working with an organisation called K180, in an evangelism project. K180's core ministry is to work alongside Churches proclaiming the Gospel and equipping the next generation to do likewise. The church has also invested in a part-time intern from K180 to help us during 2021.

This was a big step out in faith, quite literally... Since Good Friday, on Saturday mornings, a relatively small, but committed, team split up and some spend an hour or so with a table and display board in the Market Square in Brentford while others prayer-walk around the area. Those in the Square engage with passers-by or anyone who comes up to the table - where there are tracts and free bibles - in conversation. I imagine it is a bit like Dave Workman and the open-air campaigners, although with a different style, and without the artistic skills. What we have learned from the debriefing sessions after a Saturday morning, is that people are being drawn to the team. Of course the majority of people passing by are not interested, avoiding eye contact, or ignoring or politely declining. But the team has seen a real need in people, whether they have a Christian background or quite the opposite, people are ready to talk about spiritual things, people who feel they are of low worth, feel sadness, feel lost, some say they believe in God but have no idea of the gospel; others are often happy to receive prayer.

Peter was shaken out of his complacency and found a reception for the gospel message in a most unexpected place, and confirmation of its acceptance in the most remarkable way. Here and there the team in Brentford has also been seeing signs of curiosity and engagement. It is still early days, but it has been encouraging.

One might have thought the winter lockdown of 2020-2021 was not the time to embark on anything dramatic but, on the contrary, we found at BFC that we were able to have a weekly church study night on the topic of Christian discipleship from January through to April on Zoom with attendance greater than ever we could have achieved at an evening meeting at the church! This was to prepare the members for the evangelism project, but it's not all about a presence in the streets of the town but living the gospel in members' homes, in their own daily lives and in their workplaces. But it has felt that this was right as an action of the pent-up church. For we have a responsibility as a church and as individuals because as Paul puts it in Romans 10:14-15,

"How can people have faith in the Lord and ask him to save them, if they have never heard about him? And how can they hear, unless someone tells them? And how can anyone tell them without being sent by the Lord?" (CEV)

In our reading today, we heard right at the end, that Cornelius asks Peter to stay a while. You see Cornelius realised the need he and his friends had for teaching and fellowship – those precious few days must have been one big crash course in discipleship!

That is still an everyday issue for our churches today – how to nurture those young in the faith, and to be fair, those not so young in it too, as no one can be an over-mature Christian.

In this time of re-emergence, it is surely a time to refresh our discipleship. Through teaching, through mentoring, through small groups and bible study - in these and other ways to build up the body of Christ as disciples and not as mere followers. We readily admit that the practicalities of doing just that is something BFC is wrestling with at the moment. If we want to see lives brought to Christ, we must be ready to accept and foster those who take that big step and come through the doors.

After all, God showed Peter that the Great Commandment is not to go and make disciples of all nations, baptising them *and making them Jews first!* We mustn't fall into the trap of drawing up rules and expectations that become obstacles to those who would come to Christ. As soon as someone joins a fellowship that fellowship inevitably changes. This is a lesson we are going to have to learn in our own church, just like every church.

None of us are the people we were 15 months ago. Look at this service – the technology being used: many at church, some at home, and some even beyond the boundaries of Kent! This has been a huge step change in how Christ's church has been doing church. We cannot go back to doing things as we always did. Like Peter we need to embrace the opportunities God now offers us and unleash the church in new ways in the power of the Spirit