

Michelstadt, 28th July 2020

Sunday, 2nd August 2020¹

Isaiah 2, 1 – 5

Acts 10

Hello, good morning and welcome to this talk on 2nd August; or should I rather say: *Guten Morgen oder Guten Tag*, since I am recording this in Michelstadt, Germany, my hometown where I am staying in the family home, the house which my parents had designed and built more than forty years ago. Whilst here I am also visiting my mother who now lives in a residential facility in a nearby spa town.

Acts 10 is one of my favourite passage. It shows how Christianity has always developed and changed, how rules can be relativized or even abolished, all for the benefit of the message: salvation for all, which does not exclude anyone. Even the leader of young church has much to learn and one commentator calls this passage “The re-education of Peter”.

The focal point of the story is God communicating with people who need to keep up with Him. First, we encounter Cornelius who is a Centurion in the Roman army, a leader of 100 soldiers, equivalent to a captain in modern terms – his role as a professional soldier is significant. He is posted to the far-flung edge of the Roman Empire and seems to have really engaged with the local culture. So much so that he had adopted the local religion: Judaism. Not just toying with it, but really entering into the Jewish faith as much as he could: spiritually and practically, following the beliefs but also doing good works, giving his money generously. Despite his earnest quest for God, Cornelius was not considered a Jew. His status described in the text as a God-fearer was that of a proselyte, someone who followed the faith but was not a Jew. He was excluded from the Jewish community because of his lack of circumcision but also because of his role in the Roman army, the hated occupiers of the land.

Yet, Cornelius believed in God and prayed. These prayers were answered with what scholars describe as a corporeal vision: an angel appears to him, tells him about Peter and asks Cornelius to send for this man. Cornelius immediately obeys and sends some of his household to bring Peter to his home.

Meanwhile Peter also had a vision, scholars would classify it as an imaginary vision not perceived through the eyes but in the mind. Peter had not eaten for a while, perhaps he had been fasting, and it is soon time for the afternoon meal. No surprise that food was on his mind. The picture he sees is of all sorts of animals and the instruction: kill and eat is repeated three times. The significance of the invitation lies in the fact that the assortment of animals shown are those which Jewish food laws forbid.

One of the distinguishing features of Judaism are all the laws relating to food and how it is to be prepared. There is a clear distinction between clean and unclean, what is permitted and what is not. From this comes the division of humanity into two Jew and Gentile, the separation of people into two groups: those you are allowed to mix with, the fellow Jews, and those you are not supposed to associate with: the Gentiles.

¹ This is not an exact transcript of the talk, rather the written version which contains a few more thoughts and ideas.

Peter is given his vision three times, just like the risen Jesus had asked him on the beach three times: “Do you love me?” – the message has to sink in, must get through to Peter beyond doubt and he eventually accepts what he is to take on board: There is no longer any distinction between clean and unclean food and by implication that the division of humanity into two groups, Jews and Gentiles, is no longer valid. Thus, Peter is re-educated: away from the Jewish law to the all-embracing love of God. Being prepared in this way, Peter is ready to welcome the messengers of Cornelius and is willing to go on a journey with them.

Peter, on entering Cornelius’ house, is well-aware that he breaks with Jewish custom and law and says so, but he does this in order to tell Cornelius and his entourage about Jesus, the one and only Son of God, the Messiah who had been appointed by God to bring forgiveness and new life to all who believe in Him. Peter explains about the miracles but also the crucifixion, death, and resurrection of Jesus. On hearing this message, Cornelius, and all with him are filled with the Holy Spirit. They are so inspired that they begin to speak in tongues. This is understood as a clear sign that God had accepted them fully, despite being Gentiles, and they are baptised.²

The events here echo those from the Day of Pentecost: The Holy Spirit coming, Peter preaching an inspired sermon and people coming to faith. The difference, apart from the numbers involved is that on the Day of Pentecost those coming to faith had been Jewish pilgrims from different parts of the world, now the ones baptised are Gentiles.

Peter learned to keep up with God, embraced the dynamism and all-inclusiveness of the Gospel: Jesus really died for all, and all are able to receive forgiveness and new life. What makes the story from Acts 10 also very interesting is the reaction in chapter 11.

Here we meet the voices of tradition, of conservatism who hold on to a very literal interpretation of scripture and who focus on the law and not the good news. Chapter 11 shows that there have always been arguments in the church, arguments about matters of substance, not just superficial issues. Peter is able to convince the other Christian leaders who all had a clear Jewish ancestry that Jesus really includes all and that people need to change their attitudes. Hearing the testimony of Peter, the first repetition of Cornelius’ story, the others become convinced that Peter has done the right thing.

If they had persisted in their narrow application of the Gospel, Christianity would have remained a Jewish sect, a small splinter group that may well have died out. But God’s plan was far bigger, and the early Christian Church had to adapt and keep up with God’s thinking which is so much more inclusive than the imagination of the first leaders.

What we can learn from all this is being open to God’s plans, keeping up with his thinking which is in bigger categories. Christianity has always changed and developed. Over the past 40 or so years, the Church of England, its leaders, and its members had to keep up with God’s step with regards to the equality of men and women and their ordained ministry as priests and bishops. Many women in the 1970s, or before, had visions and vocations, calling them to serve as priests long before this option existed for them. Just like Peter, many had to learn through visions and through an open-minded study of Scripture that female ordained ministry is perfectly acceptable to God. Many leaders had to

² In the Old Testaments, for example in Isaiah 2, 1 – 5, there is talk that one day people of all nations will come to faith in God, will worship Him in His glory. But this is always associated with the final days, when the world as we know it comes to an end. Until then, there is the exclusion of the Gentiles and other nations can only watch and show respect of God. However, with Jesus the end times have come, in many ways his death and resurrection signal the beginning of the new age, the new world and thus all are welcome already.

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be re-educated through the Holy Spirit and the testimony of others, many a debate had to be fought and won, but now only a few would question the uncountable blessings of ordained female ministry.

As we reflect on Acts 10, we need to ask ourselves where God is leading His church in the future, which seemingly radical steps need to be taken, what we need to embrace in order to keep up with God's vision which is always so much bigger than our own. God never excludes and is far more accepting and inclusive than most think. Christianity has always responded and been open to changes, adopted new ideas and but into perspective things which to some seemed to be unchangeable.