

Text: Acts 10:1-48

Theme: The God of surprises

Sermon delivered by Dele Agbelusi on 23/11/2008 at 5.00pm.

Acts 10:1-11:18 is the longest single narrative in Acts. It can be assumed that Cornelius' conversion (with the various themes it highlights) which is at the heart of the narrative is of immense importance to the gospel writer. What I intend to do in this sermon is to first engage with what the narrative is not trying to say.

Salvation is not of and by works

The story of Cornelius especially v.34 is being used in the debate today about whether people can be saved without hearing the gospel. They say that God has no favourites, so long as the heart is right, the man or woman is sincere in their beliefs and good in their behaviour then God is not prejudiced. He has no favourites, including Christians. A good Buddhist is just as acceptable to God as a good Baptist. And I think it has to be admitted that on the face of it such an argument carries some force, especially in a pluralistic and religiously ecumenical age like ours. It also seems to give weight to the objection often thrown at Christians: 'What about Mr so and so. He doesn't go to church and yet he is a better 'Christian' than many of those who do.' Meaning, of course, that he is a nicer person. So what do you say?

Well, the first thing to say is that Dr Luke who wrote this book makes it quite clear that salvation- being put right with God and being rescued from our sin- **only** comes through consciously trusting in the Lord Jesus Christ and so in chapter 4:12 he records the apostle Peter saying these words: 'Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to man by which he *must* be saved.' That is crystal clear isn't it? It allows no room for any ambiguity at all. Secondly, if we examine the whole story, God's response to Cornelius' godly attitude was not to save him by works but to show him how he could learn of the way of salvation. In fact, the angel told Cornelius that Peter 'will bring you a message through which you and your entire household will be saved' (Acts 11:14).

Meet the gentleman Cornelius

Cornelius was a centurion which translates to a commander of 100 soldiers. He was a God-fearer though not a full convert to Judaism but he was sympathetic to Jewish ethics and theology. Here he was a Roman soldier, a member of the hated occupying forces who in spite of all of that, was actually riding high in the popularity stakes amongst the Jews and with good reason. In 10:2, we are told that he was generous. If he heard about anyone in need he took practical steps to remedy the situation. And in addition, we are informed that he prayed to God regularly. Whether he was fully aware of it or not, Cornelius still had a problem. It was the problem he shared with the rest of humanity. The problem being that he was on the wrong side of God and needed to be brought on the right side of him. Now to any impartial observer nothing could have been further from the truth.

So here is someone who in every respect is putting his faith into practice. And if Cornelius were around to day do you know where he would be found? Well, here of

course, sitting in the congregation- extremely nice, extremely generous, but extremely lost.

Salvation is for all

So what else is the narrative saying? It is confirming the universality of God's plan of salvation. The hope that Gentiles and other outcasts will share in the blessing of God first gained prominence in Gen.12:3 and it is a recurring theme throughout the Old Testament. Jesus underscored this fact in his response to another Centurion's great faith in Matt. 8:11 'I say to you many will come from the east and west, and will take their places at the feast with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven.' It is interesting that Peter, at the time he saw his vision was lodging in the house of Simon the tanner. A tanner by trade, works with the hides of dead animals, some of which may be ritually unclean (like pigs). But to a tanner, a hide is a hide, a way of making a living. In the Babylonian Talmud – a compilation of Rabbinic teachings and interpretation during the 3rd-6th centuries AD - appears this statement: "Woe to him, who is a tanner by trade". It was a demeaning trade in Jewish eyes and tanners were ceremonially unclean since they handled dead animals (Num. 19:11-13). A tanner's shop had to be in the outskirts of town because of the bad odour that came from it and Simon's home was by the sea (Acts 10:6). I am sure nowadays many of you will see Simon's house as seaside property and a desirable location.

10:9-16

God now wants to use Peter to open another door for the gospel, (10:9-16) as he did on the day of Pentecost. In his vision, while he was hungry, he was presented with an array from the animal world, including those that had been regarded as unclean. But these animals were from heaven and he was commanded to eat as his soul desired. He was revolted by the command and refused to obey, even though God may have been the one giving it to him to assuage his hunger.

The dietary laws for the Jews were a matter of survival and identity, not just etiquette or peculiar culinary habit. So if you can't understand the dietary issue as being such a big deal, try thinking of it this way. Imagine anything that is, for you, the dividing line between Christians and other people. Call to mind the one thing that makes us who we are and who we are not; the one thing you are certain is non-negotiable; the one thing we cannot let slide without compromising our whole identity as people of God. And when you have figured out where that line is, imagine having a dream wherein God asks you to cross it. And if you can get in touch with that, I think you can get in touch with Peter "up on the roof."

God came into the picture when he said "Do not call anything impure (Gk. literary translate as common) that God has made clean". You must stop considering it as common. If God says it's alright, then it's alright. The impact of the vision is heightened by its repetition (v.16). Peter will soon realise that he may not consider any group of people common or unclean either (v.28). God is now breaking the old distinctions that divided people.

God is showcasing to the church that the Jewish idea that anyone not conforming to their national standards of purity could not be saved is no longer valid. Peter is able to

say that he now realizes “how true it is that God does not show favouritism”. That Peter needed a drastic message from God to get rid of his prejudices about differences among people suggests that even mature Christians need a major paradigm shift – a spiritual awakening- in order to develop God’s mindset.

Peter meets Cornelius’ representatives (vv. 7-23)

Peter probably wondered what this mysterious vision was all about. About this time, the Scripture tells us that three men representing Cornelius approached the Tanner’s house, and requested to see Peter. The representatives told Peter about their leader. Remember, at this point, Cornelius had not been introduced to Christ. He was a Gentile (a non-Jew), but he was searching for the truth. The representatives desired Peter to journey with them to meet their leader, Cornelius, who was a man of prayer, righteous and God-Fearing, and respected by many Jews.

Doesn't God do this to us? He prepares us for a situation just as he prepared Peter. We may wonder what all this preparation is about, and then the A-HA moment comes. It begins to fit together. How often we miss the benefits of God's preparation, either because we are impatient or because we allow our will to get in the way. Peter, as of yet, has not had that A-HA experience, but it was about to fit together, and because Peter was willing to listen to God's voice and act patiently, a new era is about to be ushered in for the Christian faith.

A new dawn in the spread of the gospel (vv. 24-48)

The next morning, Peter and the representatives journeyed to Caesarea. Cornelius was expecting them. He had gathered his family and friends for this occasion, and as they greeted, Peter began to feel uncomfortable. Jews were not to associate with Gentiles, much less visit with them. And then the A-HA moment. He remembers the vision. "How can I call anything that God creates unclean . . . Why that is not just about dietary rules . . . it is about people." The supposed "unclean animals" represent the Gentiles, and suddenly God is no longer just the God of the Jew. How difficult that reality must have been for Peter, and how humbling, and yet how tremendous it was that the disciple was open to this truth.

There is a small incident in verses 25 and 26 which may go unnoticed- the humility of Cornelius. He fell at Peter’s feet in reverence. But Peter will have none of this, as such reverence is reserved only for God. I wonder what many of our “men of God” would have done in a similar situation!

And now we come to a most opportune time for Peter to share the gospel with his newfound friend and equal. And he does. He forgets the religious barrier, and begins to tell Cornelius about Jesus, his baptism, his healing ministry, his crucifixion, and his resurrection. Peter’s sermon about Jesus gave the bare but important facts about the gospel:

- That Jesus was sent by God and equipped by him through the Holy Spirit with power. Jesus is therefore God’s gift to us.
- Jesus exercised a ministry of healing in order to banish pain from people’s lives.
- He was crucified and died and he rose again.

- There are witnesses to his resurrection
- The result of his life, death and resurrection is the forgiveness of sin and reestablishment of friendship with God.

And as the gospel is being presented, the Holy Spirit pours out onto the Gentiles, and they began praising God, and speaking in unknown languages. Peter now realized what his vision had been about. God shows no favourites. Even the Gentiles could be baptized Christians. And Peter remained with them for some days. This was the beginning of the witnessing about Christ to all people, and not exclusively to the Jews. This was literally a New Era in Christianity. Later, Saul, who persecuted the Christians, would become the Apostle who took the gospel to the entire Gentile nations. What a story!