

ROOM FOR ALL

Our reading today from Acts is really the middle point of a longer story that turns out to be very important indeed.

It began with Peter having a dream on the rooftop of a friend's house where was staying.

Like many dreams it was bizarre.

A tarpaulin comes down from the sky filled with animals, but animals that it was believed that God had decreed unclean. Then a voice tells Peter to tuck in and start eating.

Of course Peter refuses. He is going to do what is right.

Then the voice says the strangest thing, *"Don't call unclean what God has called clean."*

When Peter wakes up there's a knock on the door and an invitation to go to the house of a man called Cornelius. Trouble is, Cornelius is a Gentile.

Now Gentiles and Jews don't mix.

Thanks to the dream that he had just had Peter gets a sense that God is calling him to do something a bit radical – so he accepts the invite, goes to see Cornelius, goes into his house (breaking the rules) eats a meal with him (breaking the rules) only to discover that Cornelius and his friends want be followers of Christ. When Cornelius tells Peter that God gave *him* a dream about meeting a man called Simon Peter, it seems to confirm to him that God is at work here.

So Peter takes the opportunity to offer baptism to these outsiders.

Peter says in verse 34, *"I now realize that it is true that God treats everyone on the same basis. Whoever worships God and does what is right is acceptable to God no matter what race he or she belongs to."*

And in our reading today in verse 47 he says, *"These people have received the Holy Spirit, just as we also did. Can anyone then stop them from being baptized with water?"*

It's a big step for Peter to do all of this because it's not what he has been taught to believe and it's not what he has been taught to do, but he senses that God is teaching something new.

What happens next is that Peter finds he is in big trouble when he returns to Jerusalem, because many of the other Christians believe that Gentiles can't be true Christians without converting first to Judaism. Remember the early Christians were Jews. They believed Jews were the chosen people.

So anyone who wanted to join had to become Jews - which unfortunately in the case of males involved being circumcised!

And so the story ends in a big meeting called by the church in Jerusalem where this point is debated. A Bible scholar called Raymond Brown called this meeting the most important meeting in church history. What was so important was not the detail but a principle that was discovered.

The people advocating the need for circumcision had Bible verses to back them up. Those saying circumcision was **not** necessary did not have Bible verses on their side - just a belief that God was guiding them into a new understanding.

But what was surprising was this – that in the end, after much talking (and not a little prayer), the whole church agreed that these guys were right – that God had a new message for the church.

Despite what they had been taught to believe in the past, despite what was actually written in the scriptures, God had new truth for them to learn.

And I dare say that men all over the place ever since have been relieved to know of that decision, but the really important point isn't circumcision.

The really important thing that the church learned is that God is still speaking and the words in the Bible may not always be the last word on a subject. There are new things for us to learn.

What the first followers of Jesus had to learn was that God's love was broader than they had imagined. God was concerned not just with the people in their group but everyone else as well.

And it's a message that the church needs to keep learning and applying in every age.

Peter had crossed a line. He had disobeyed their rules. He had abandoned the words of scripture.

Yes, he had done all of these things.

But God had led him to this. And that was the day the church took the biggest step forward that it ever took.

It went from being a Jewish sect to a movement for all people everywhere.

Because of this you and I are here today, without that fact we probably wouldn't even have heard of Christ.

The gospel of Jesus is about the power of God to change people's minds as to who is in or out.

God is always in the business of doing that. Challenging us to be more welcoming and to tear down the dividing wall between people that make one lot think they are superior to some others.

A few years ago the then minister of Dunblane Cathedral, Colin McIntosh, was involved in a conversation in Scottish Churches House with representatives from World Mission partner Churches.

Together they were talking about the different way people understand the Bible...

An African American man spoke about the Christmas story and mentioned the bit that says "*there was no room for them in the inn.*"

Then he asks them – What does it mean?
Sounds obvious!

Then he said it again. *There was no room – **for them** – in the inn.*
The change in emphasis gave it a different meaning.
No room **for them** at the inn.

Colin McIntosh said *“Then it hit me – here was a man who has grown up in America in the 1950s and had gone to many an inn that had rooms available – but not for **him** – not for **them**.”*

Mary and Joseph belonged to the lowest class of people in their society. The Hebrew word to describe them was *anawim* – the poor ones, the lowly. There was no room for them in the inn.
If a wealthy merchant had turned up on that night, might the innkeeper have found room for him?
If the Wise Men had turned up that night and presumably these guys must have had a few bob, might room have been found for them?

An African saw what that meant.
He said to us all that day – *“always read the Bible through the eyes of those who’ve been excluded, who feel rejected, and you’ll know what it means.”*

The eyes and the experience of African Christians have added much to our understanding of faith. Their honesty and insight have made God a lot bigger and more just.
But there was a time when there was no room for them in the church.
The church sanctioned their slavery. The church said it was their destiny to be slaves, and it was even God’s will because it was right there in the Bible *“Slaves obey your masters”*.
And when eventually Christian eyes were opened to what was always in the Bible – the equality of all God’s children, we were not abandoning the authority of scripture.
We were instead learning something new about God.

It doesn’t help when we hear some people – even ministers – going on about “the plain meaning of scripture” when sometimes it isn’t plain at all. That’s why we need the Holy Spirit – the actual Spirit of God to help us into the truth.

Sometimes people say isn’t this hard – to work out what matters most from the Bible?
Well it *is* hard in some ways and that’s usually why Christians disagree with one another.

On the other hand, this very job is part of our responsibility as Christian people. Thinking about this stuff is a part of what it actually means to be a Christian.

So as well as using our God-given brains, when we read our Bibles we need to pray for God's Spirit to help us and to guide us to the truth – and we need to be aware of our greatest aid.

Our greatest aid is Jesus.

Whenever we read a passage of scripture we need to ask ourselves whether this fits in with the words, the lifestyle, the priorities and the message of Jesus.

If something is true to Jesus, it will be true.

It's vitally important that we "get" this.

Down through the years we have learned more and more about inclusiveness and have opened our doors wider, and yet so often only after a debate where some Christians have objected (quoting the Bible to make their case).

When we argued about ending slavery, there were Christians who defended it and said it was biblical.

They were wrong.

When we argued for equal treatment of women, some shouted out Bible verses which suggested that women are subservient and so argued against.

They were wrong.

When we argued for equality for people of all colours, some quoted the Bible to suggest that some races are inferior.

They were wrong.

Today, when we argue about the acceptance of gay and lesbian people, some Christians quote the Bible and call them an abomination.

They are wrong.

The Bible is not a book we use to clobber other groups of people.

The central message of the Bible, the unchanging truth about God is this – we are loved and we are precious to God.

Jesus said, "*Love one another as I have loved you.*" (John 15:12)

One day the whole church will stand up and offer a welcome to everyone.

One day all the barriers will be broken down.

God wills that the church offers acceptance to all – that Christians will say to those all around them – you are welcome.

And this growing understanding of God's love and compassion for everyone began with that strange dream all those years ago.

Acts 10:44-48 (John 15:9-17)

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