

CCH Sermon 30th May 2021. "No favouritism"- Acts 10:1-48

v34-35

▲ Some of us are old enough to remember the Berlin Wall coming down in 1989, marking the end of the Iron Curtain, and the start of freedom from communism in Europe.

What we are about to see in Acts 10 is an even bigger wall coming down. It's the barrier that stopped the gospel going out to non-Jews being ripped down. Up til now the church thinks the gospel is for less than 1% of the planet. Now it's for 100%. And who was it who ripped it down? It was God himself.

It's easy to be blinded to the seismic significance of this event. Perhaps that's because we just take it for granted today, that the gospel is for non-Jews like us. Yet the fact that there are still barriers and blind spots in the church over gender, race, class shows us that we may need this passage more than we think. Only one month ago, BBC's Panorama programme ran an investigation into racism in the Church of England- (the link is on the dig deeper).

Well the Cornelius story is quite a long passage and will take us today's sermon and next week's sermon with guest preacher Diego from Brazil, but it's a story of three kinds of conversion.

Having seen *Paul* recently Converted in the book of Acts we have today the conversion of Cornelius & his friends. But actually there was a sense in which first of all Peter had to be "converted" too, (not in the sense of becoming a Christian like Cornelius, but converted in his thinking to the concept of "No favouritism"- the gospel being for all), and then afterwards the church needed to be converted to this unexpected inclusion as well in ch11- Diego's passage next week).

So today we're going to look at 1) the "conversion" of Peter, and then we're going to look at 2) the conversion of Cornelius & the Gentiles, and as we do so, we are going to learn some really important lessons about who Christianity is for. In each half there's a challenge for us in Huntingdon today.

1) Peter is converted to the "gospel for all".

Since this is a long reading, Sam's going to read it in chunks as we go along, and we'll pause fairly briefly between each of the scenes.

1) This first half is in three scenes. First it focuses on **Cornelius**.

READING (SCENE 1)= v1-8.

Just a couple of things to point out here.

- Corney is a Roman Soldier living along the coast in the Roman garrison town named after Augustus Caesar v1.
- He's pretty high ranking, but he's actually quite a religious bloke. v2
- He was obviously dissatisfied with the Roman religion, and he saw in his Jewish neighbours a link with the one true God, which he soon converted to, becoming a "God fearer".
- He wasn't willing to go the whole hog and get circumcised (the sign of becoming a Jew) but he came under the wing of the Jewish faith and was praying to God (in fact the word memorial in v4 is taken from the Old testament sacrifices in Leviticus 2).
- That didn't mean he knew Jesus though, hence what happens next.
- God is clearly at work, intervenes v3 with a vision of an angel and Corney is directed to send some men off for Peter with pinpoint accuracy v4-6.
- And that's what he does v7-8

- So that's scene one. ***Cornelius is prepared.***

2) Let's move on now to see ***Peter being prepared.***

READING (SCENE2)= v9-23

- Remember from scene 1 that Cornelius' men are on their way to see Peter?
- In God's perfect timing, (which we see again and again in the book of Acts), though it's now day 2 God taps Peter on the shoulder just as they are about to arrive.
- It's lunchtime, and like how your shopping can be affected if you shop while you are hungry, perhaps your thinking can also be affected if you fall into a God given vision while you are hungry and food is being cooked downstairs.
- In his trance (literally ecstasy) God gives him a vision of a sheet filled with animals, which would have included all the kinds of animals that Jews didn't eat.
- And then this shock.
- (Now just pause and remember Peter in chapter 9 telling Aeneas the paralytic and Dorcas the dead woman to "Get up"), well now Peter is told to GET UP AND EAT.
 - I think we've got no concept of how radical that would have been for Peter.
 - A strict Jew, being told to eat pork or shellfish or certain birds. It's like you telling your Muslim neighbour that it's fine not to eat Halal. Everything in his upbringing, his customs tells him "no"!
 - And Peter, who was never one to mind telling Jesus he'd got it wrong, says it again, "Surely not Lord!"
 - But Jesus had already declared all foods clean in Mark 7:19. And the voice came back (3 times in fact), saying that God had cleansed all unclean food.
- Well Peter comes round, no doubt ready for lunch, and wondering what all that was about (v17) and then instead the doorbell goes.
- More divine guidance (v19-20) and cue the divinely inspired meeting.
- It's all so perfectly organised by God (v21)

3) Well let's move to the meeting itself, and this is where the penny drops

READING (SCENE3)= v24-34

- First Peter v25 reminds Corneius he's just a bloke and tells him not to reverence him. It just shows how hugely charged the moment was, and gives a ring of authenticity.
- Peter starts with a reminder of the normal cultural protocols (v28)
- That's fascinating because it shows that he's understanding what the vision was about, not just unclean food but rather unclean people.
- Take away the food from being unclean, and the people are no longer unclean.
- Why have you sent me v29?
- And Cornelius retells his story, culminating in the whole room being ready.
- Did you see the emphasis that they are ready to listen to a message (v22, 33)
- And that's where v34 our keyverse kicks in! v34, v35
- Peter has been convinced by this vision and this God given train of events, that he should no longer treat Gentiles as off limits for the gospel.

Do you see how against the grain this was for Peter. It was totally out of his comfort zone. He had grown up a good Jew, and I understand some good Jews were trained to thank God each morning that they weren't non-Jewish. Although God had always made clear that the privileges his Old Testament people enjoyed were always due to his gracious gift, and not their merit, and that the blessing to Israel was to bless every nation, nevertheless a sense of superiority could so easily creep into Jewish thinking.

And sadly it crept into the church as well. Peter just assumed that Christianity would be for the Jews. Possibly for the Jews from all nations scattered across the Roman empire, but for the Jews.

But it took some serious intervention by God the Holy Spirit to convince him... v34 "I now realise how true it is that God does not show favouritism".

And if God doesn't show favouritism, nor should we.

The lesson?

Stop limiting the gospel!

Do you remember that card game Top Trumps? Every card might have a different Disney character on it, and then it's ranked with a mark out of 100 for number of songs, number of films, cute factor etc.

Well I wonder if without realising we place a mark out of 100 for how likely we feel someone is to become a Christian: that person, she's a kind teacher. 80% convertability. QAnon conspiracy theory stormer of the capitol 10%. Your neighbour 40%. Your died in the wool atheist schoolfriend 5%.

God doesn't place limits on who should hear the gospel and nor should we.

Is there someone at work who you think is off limits for hearing the good news of Jesus, because you they are from another religion or you think they'll never become a Christian. Stop limiting the gospel!

Or has a subtle racism crept into our thinking that suggests that the gospel is an English thing, and if someone is from another part of the world, then they are outsiders to the gospel? We're the outsiders. It's a miracle any of us non-Jews are Christians. But God is in the business of miracles, as we are about to see. Do you know at the moment there are huge numbers of people turning to Jesus in Iran and China. Far more probably than in the UK. Stop limiting the gospel!

So let's see God open up the Christian faith to the Gentiles.

Let's move onto the second half....

2) Cornelius and friends are converted by the "gospel for all".

And let's have the next SCENE 4 Sam- the gospel preaching (starting back in v34-43)

- I love this sermon. It's a model of clarity, summing up the wonderful good news. Here is the gospel message that we want to be talking about with our friends.
- v36.
 - A message of peace. Something people are desperately lacking today, peace within themselves, peace within their homes, but esp Peace with God.
 - It's first for the people of Israel- that's who Jesus first went to.
 - But he's the Lord of all.
- The message about Jesus is in 5 parts> First we have **Jesus life** v37-38
- His **death** v39.
- His **resurrection** and appearances v40-41.
- And his return as **judge** v42
- And the **response** v43.
 - Did you see the word everyone again.
 - A reminder Jesus is for all.

- Perhaps there's someone tuning in today, or flicking through our Youtube channel at some distant point in the future, and you want peace with God.
 - Like Cornelius, even if you pray or give to charity, you would consider yourself an outsider.
 - You've never been to church.
 - You are not religious.
 - You are gay.
 - You are a crook.
 - You don't think you'd fit in.
 - Your life is a mess.
 - Can I say none of these things puts you off limits from God.
 - You may feel you are an outsider, but God welcomes you in!
 - Look at Jesus, come to Jesus
 - **v43 Everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name.**
 - You desperately need your sins forgiven before you meet God when you die.
 - But Jesus has taken the curse for sin from God in your place.
 - And if God welcomes you, then we welcome you.
- The good news was for Cornelius, the good news was for you! Here it is in Acts 10. It's wonderful. The good news of peace through Jesus.
- And do you know even before the end of the sermon, Cornelius and his friends gathered on his sofas were becoming Christians.

The last 2 scenes are very quick....

Let's have **SCENE 5**. v44-46.

- The Holy Spirit came on them.
- Part of the evidence was that they were speaking in tongues (though that can be faked) and praising God (real genuine joy in God normally can't be!)
- It's like Pentecost all over again.
- God is accepting the Gentiles.
- Cornelius and friends are converted by the "gospel for all" .

And finally SCENE 6 (v46b-48)

- God has clearly brought them to repentance and faith, and so v47 let's not stand in the way of them being baptised. The outward sign of an inward washing.
- Don't call anything impure that God has made clean!

Well the final application. **Stop limiting God!**

When we put limits on who we think should hear the gospel, we are actually putting limits on God.

Perhaps as we've worked our way through Acts these last few weeks, you've gone a bit quiet, because to be honest, you just don't share your faith. People in your workplace, or in your running group, or on your street, just don't know you are a Christian. You never talk about even the fact that you go to church.

Well can I ask.

Or do you think people need to earn the right to hear the gospel?

Or do you just think they could never become Christians.

Your running group might be the very people God wants to save this week, and you might be the only Christian. Don't limit God! Why not start with asking them what they believe?!

- God can save a Saul.
- God can save a Cornelius.
- God even saved you!

Don't limit God!

Wouldn't it be a tragedy if the Covid vaccine was held back from some people that it could help.

Wouldn't it be an even greater tragedy if Jesus was held back from some people.

No favouritism.

God wants everyone to hear the gospel. Here we see him smashing down the wall.

If he wants others to hear the gospel, shouldn't we?

Don't limit the gospel, don't limit God!

And if someone becomes a Christian from a background very different from yours. Should they have to do all the flexing or should we?

Imagine a group of Bangladeshis or travellers or Iranians or Northerners or Australians or Disabled folk or millionaires became Christians and joined us at SMPS next week. What would they find at CCH? A warm welcome? No favouritism? Of course. I hope so. Because we all are privileged outsiders that have been welcomed in.

Let's pray.