

Sermon - 15 May 2022 - Acts 11: 1-18, John 13: 31 - 35.

In the Name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, Amen.

In the early years of the church, they had to work out who they were and what they were for. The vast majority of the people who followed Jesus were good Jews – men and women who worshipped in their synagogues, listened to their rabbis, went to the Temple in Jerusalem for special occasions. Some were good religious men and women, others didn't do religion more than they had to. For some Jesus was a political leader, for some this movement was going to get rid of the Romans, for others they needed someone who would love them, heal them, change their lives.

After his resurrection, some of his followers would refuse to believe it – we thought he was the Messiah, we thought he would change everything, but he let himself die – no man is the Messiah if they nail him to a tree. Others were convinced he was alive, that he had conquered death – they had to work out what that meant. They received the Holy Spirit, they knew a power they had never known before, somehow God was at work inside them, they knew a new power, a new relationship, they knew God was at work in them.

They came together – perhaps as they had come together before. Sometimes a congregation, people coming together to worship God in the Jewish tradition, they had all accepted that Jesus was the Messiah, they felt the Holy Spirit come upon them. And this is different – they feel different, and they have to work out how this new feeling, this new understanding, this new spirit – how it affects their relationship with others.

And the mix is enlivened by the fact the non-Jews, Gentiles, are also believing that Jesus is the Messiah, are also receiving the Holy Spirit. They are part of this new movement, but for many Jews this new movement is in fact a continuation of something old – their religion, their faith, their relationship with God – just as God's relationship with His people goes back centuries.

And God's relationship with His people demands certain rules, standards and practices. For the men, circumcision – that is the mark of a Jew. If this faith is a continuation of Judaism, then that mark is vital. Vital – with all the embarrassment, pain, danger, that that operation would mean, especially to an adult man. If you want to encourage men to follow Jesus and be part of all this, not exactly a selling point. To some church leaders, of vital importance – to others, not important at all.

Judaism also has food laws, laws set down by God in the books of Moses, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy, and these must be followed. It's not like current day advice – eat your five a day – these are rules. And yet the disciples in Jerusalem, the keepers of Tradition, they hear that Peter is allowing new disciples, foreign disciples – he is allowing them to ignore the Law, ignoring the very word of God Himself. They are not happy – it's change, and none of us like that, but it's also, as far as they are concerned, leading people into sin. And that is wrong.

Peter argues it is not sinful, and he tells the story of a dream. This dream came to a man who had betrayed his best friend when the need was the greatest, but been forgiven and commissioned. This man was one of the leaders of the church, he knew Jesus had a task for him.

Other Jewish leaders were in a righteous huff about what he was doing – and I'm sure some of them were equating it with the failure he had been when he denied Jesus. You imagine them saying “well he betrayed Jesus then, now he's betraying God's word, betraying centuries of practice.”

But Peter has a reply ready. He speaks of a dream, a vision, which had meant a lot to him. He knew what it meant when he saw all the creatures of the land and sea brought to him, not once but three times.

All food is acceptable. No animal or creature, on land or sea, is unacceptable to God any longer. For an observant Jew, even after the resurrection of Jesus, it's a big thing. After all, the rules were strict, from the time of Moses. Certain animals were not to be eaten, ever. It was important. Right to the basis of their beliefs. After all, if you were faithful even in this, what you ate every day, surely people would know that you were religious, set apart as special. So if you were suddenly willing to eat anything, with anyone, well you were no better than non Jews, surely.

Peter says that this is not the case. He has been summoned to meet with a big household, many generations of gentiles living together, and had seen how the Holy Spirit had come to them just as it had come down to them, just as it had on him and his friends. He knew, and they knew, “Then God has given even to the Gentiles the repentance that leads to life”.

Peter knew that he no longer had to guard against eating the wrong things, eating with non Jews, keeping the message of Jesus to just one group of people. The message of Jesus, the Holy Spirit, was for everyone, anyone. Not just the rich, or the poor. Not just for those who lived in the right place, kept the rules, had regular life styles, but everyone. It was for everyone, everywhere. Just like a

sign had gone up, saying everyone welcome. It was a powerful change, a change for the better, a turning point. Peter, Paul, even women, could take the message of Christianity everywhere, to everyone for all time. It's still, as certain people say, a thing. Our gospel is not for us, a small group of holy people, it is a gospel for all.

We need to be able to talk about our faith. Why faith matters to us, what difference being a Christian makes to us. Some Christians go on and on about Jesus in their lives as if that's the be-all and end-all of it. I do have a personal relationship with Jesus, I do feel Him at work within me although I find it difficult to explain exactly what that means. I know that the power of the Holy Spirit gives me strength to get through when life is tough, gives me power to love when love is difficult – and so often I find the love of Jesus, the power of the Spirit, as I share with my fellow Christians.

I spent Thursday morning helping at Baby and Toddler Group. Making the tea, sitting and chatting, getting to know mums – not a bad old life, is it? One mum did ask about baptism, which is good – and the Kingdom of God was also being built as three of the mums and their children went off for a picnic lunch together in the park. Then a wedding, the couple live in Manchester so I doubt we'll see much of them, but they – and their 120 guests – have had a good experience of church, have listened to the words of Scripture, and hopefully have seen a bit of the Kingdom at work. I'm still not sure how I've managed to get four weddings in the diary for this coming week, but we'll celebrate with them – it is a privilege.

I am frightened of much that goes on at the moment, frightened by what my country has become, frightened by the evil that surrounds us. But I must believe God is stronger than evil, and if I believe that, if we believe that, we must continue to work to build the Kingdom. It may not look like the Kingdom ten, twenty, fifty, years ago – but God is still at work with us, and through us. Amen.