

Acts 10:23b-48

Introduction

Sometimes the penny drops. It doesn't always happen, in my experience. But sometimes, when I'm trying to do a crossword or a Su Doku, or following the plot of a film, the penny suddenly drops and I understand what I had previously struggled to grasp. We've got to the section of Acts where the penny finally drops for Peter. The lightbulb comes on. He finally gets it.

If you were with us when we started this sermon series, you may remember me saying that my headline message is that Christianity is about faith in Jesus, not ethnicity. And in our passage today, Peter grasps three important and wonderful truths. Firstly, God does not show favouritism. Secondly, everyone who believes in Jesus receives forgiveness for sin. And thirdly, the Holy Spirit is given to Jews and Gentiles alike. Those are our three headings this morning, which we'll think about one at a time.

So, to begin then, Peter grasps the first great truth of the passage; that God does not show favouritism. That's our first heading: God does not show favouritism.

God does not show favouritism

Last week we were introduced to a Roman centurion called Cornelius, who was known to be a devout and God-fearing man. And we read how God prompted Cornelius to send for the apostle Peter to hear what he had to say. We also read how God prompted Peter to go to Cornelius even though he was a Gentile. God had been preparing each of them for the encounter that we're reading about today.

In our passage this morning, Peter has now reached Caesarea, having set out from Joppa the previous day. Here's a map again, to remind us where they are. Both towns are on the coast. Caesarea is about a day's journey north of Joppa.

Cornelius has called together all his relatives and close friends, and they're waiting at the house for Peter to arrive. They don't know what he's going to say but they expect it to be something important. We can imagine the sense of anticipation. Think of the images we see on TV of reporters standing outside Number 10 Downing Street, waiting for the Prime Minister to step out and approach the microphone to make an important statement. Judging by the news headlines, it's a scene we might see again in the coming days. Perhaps there's that sense of anticipation at the house of Cornelius. And finally, the waiting is over. Peter enters the house, and Cornelius falls at his feet in reverence, greeting him as a divine messenger. He understands that the message Peter is about to share has come from God himself. And he humbles himself before his messenger by falling at his feet.

Peter tells him to stand up. He's just a man after all. He doesn't want to be shown the reverence that belongs to God alone. So, Cornelius gets up and takes Peter inside, where he finds the large gathering of people, all eager to hear what he has to say. And Peter begins by acknowledging the strangeness of the situation. Look at verse 28. **He said to them: 'You**

are well aware that it is against our law for a Jew to associate with or visit a Gentile. But God has shown me that I should not call anyone impure or unclean. So when I was sent for, I came without raising any objection.'

Last week, we read about the vision that Peter had seen concerning food. God had told him that the food laws, which previously categorised different kinds of food as clean or unclean, no longer applied. Now, all food was declared to be clean. Those food laws had been a kind of boundary marker, differentiating Jews from the Gentiles, or non-Jews, around them. But now those food laws had been removed. And Peter had made the connection between unclean food and unclean people. So, although a pious Jew wouldn't enter the house of a Gentile, Peter had come to visit Cornelius without raising any objections. And then he asks the purpose of the visit: **'May I ask why you sent for me?'** he says. And Cornelius tells him about the vision *he* had received. And how God had instructed him to send for Peter.

The fact that God had communicated directly with Cornelius, a Gentile, is significant. It was rare but not unheard of for God to communicate with a Jew like Peter. But to communicate directly with a Gentile, as he had done with Cornelius, was a big deal. And that realisation leads Peter to the conclusion he articulates in verse 34. Please look at it again. **Then Peter began to speak: 'I now realise how true it is that God does not show favouritism but accepts from every nation the one who fears him and does what is right.'**

Peter isn't saying that all paths lead to God. Before his death, Jesus had been quite clear that no one can come to the Father except through him. All other paths are dead ends. But what Peter has realised is that people from every nation are welcome to come to the Father through Jesus, just as the Jews are. No one is excluded. The invitation is for all people everywhere. The distinction between Jew and Gentile has been abolished. We are all sinners who deserve God's condemnation. But we can each be saved through faith in Jesus. It doesn't matter where you were born, what language you speak, the colour of your skin, or the nationality on your passport, all are invited to come to the Father through Jesus. And that realisation leads Peter to grasp the second great truth in this passage: everyone who believes in Jesus receives forgiveness for sins. That's our second heading: Everyone who believes in Jesus receives forgiveness for sins.

Everyone who believes in Jesus receives forgiveness for sins

Given how close they are to Jerusalem, Peter expects the group assembled at the house of Cornelius to have heard about Jesus. Look at verse 36. **'You know the message God sent to the people of Israel, announcing the good news of peace through Jesus Christ, who is Lord of all. You know what has happened throughout the province of Judea, beginning in Galilee after the baptism that John preached – how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and power, and how he went around doing good and healing all who were under the power of the devil, because God was with him.'**

In his first book, Luke told us that good news about Jesus had spread throughout Judea, and Peter clearly expects the group listening to him to be familiar with the things Jesus had done. If you're visiting with us this morning, you may *not* be familiar with the things Jesus

did. We live 2000 years after the events of his life and 2000 miles away from where they happened. They're not headline news for *us* today. But Luke carefully recorded the things that Jesus said and did. And you can read about them for yourself by reading Luke's Gospel. I've got plenty of copies, which I'm all too happy to give away. Please do come and get one after the service if you want to, and you can read about all the things that Peter's referring to here.

But then Peter goes on to share his own distinctive role in the story. He was there, while it was all happening. Verse 39. **'We are witnesses of everything he did in the country of the Jews and in Jerusalem.'**

And then he gets to the crux of the gospel message: **'They killed him by hanging him on a cross, but God raised him from the dead on the third day and caused him to be seen. He was not seen by all the people, but by witnesses whom God had already chosen – by us who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead.'**

Peter had been there when Jesus was arrested and killed. It wasn't his finest moment. While Jesus was on trial for his life before the Jewish leaders, Peter denied knowing him three times to save his own skin. While Jesus was willingly going to his death in an act of self-sacrifice, Peter was denying his Lord in an act of self-preservation. He would feel genuine remorse over the role he'd played. But he had been there, nonetheless. And he had seen the risen Jesus after he rose from the grave. It was no hallucination. Peter ate food with him and drank with him. He could testify that Jesus really had conquered the grave. And then he says, in verse 42, **'He commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he is the one whom God appointed as judge of the living and the dead.'**

Peter has already declared Jesus to be Lord of all, and now he proclaims him to be judge of all. One day we will all stand before the risen Jesus and give account for the way we've lived our lives. On that day, we will all be found to be wanting. We all sin. We may do our best to cover it up. We might hide our worst thoughts from others. And we might try to hide our worst behaviour. But on that day, our sin will be exposed and condemned. That's the reality that we need to grasp if we're to understand the salvation that Jesus offers. By nature, each of us faces the prospect of experiencing God's righteous anger at our sin in eternity. That's what we will each rightly deserve on that day of judgement. As he looked back on his own failings, Peter knew that as well as anyone.

But the good news of the gospel is that Jesus has already faced God's condemnation on the cross in the place of his people. He has borne the anger our sin deserves. He has paid the penalty our sin demands, so that we can be forgiven. And his resurrection from the grave is the evidence that his sacrifice has been accepted. That's why Peter says about Jesus, in verse 43: **'All the prophets testify about him that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through faith in his name.'**

What Peter has come to understand is that the salvation Jesus has secured is available to everyone. It doesn't matter whether you're a Jew or a Gentile, the forgiveness that Jesus has secured is available to you through faith in him. It's an invitation that goes out to all

people everywhere, without distinction. It a message that's been preached throughout the world ever since.

But it's an invitation that needs a response. We accept it by putting our faith in Jesus alone for our standing before God. It means giving up the thought that I'm basically a good person and that it's God's job to forgive me. It means acknowledging that I'm a sinner who deserves God's condemnation. It means trusting that Jesus has won my forgiveness by his death on a cross in my place. And it means turning away from my former way of life and starting a new life, with Jesus as Lord. I take it that's what happens in Caesarea as Peter speaks, because something wonderful happens. The Holy Spirit is poured out on the household of Cornelius and Peter gives the order for them to be baptised. And that brings us to the third great truth that Peter grasps in these verses, which is that the Holy Spirit is given to Jews and Gentiles alike. That's our final heading: The Holy Spirit is given to Jew and Gentiles alike.

The Holy Spirit is given to Jews and Gentiles alike

Please look down again at verse 44. **While Peter was still speaking these words, the Holy Spirit came on all who heard the message. The circumcised believers who had come with Peter were astonished that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on Gentiles. For they heard them speaking in tongues and praising God.**

Then Peter said, 'Surely no one can stand in the way of their being baptised with water. They have received the Holy Spirit just as we have.' So he ordered that they be baptised in the name of Jesus Christ. Then they asked Peter to stay with them for a few days.

This happened at a particular moment in the history of the church. We don't necessarily expect the Holy Spirit to be received in such a spectacular way today. But nonetheless, the Bible tells us that the Holy Spirit is given to everyone who believes, Jew and Gentile alike. And that's what astonishes the Jewish Christians who were there, who are described as the circumcised believers.

God makes himself present among his people today by his Spirit. Jesus promised that after his death, when he was gone, he and the Father would come and live in his people's hearts by his Spirit. The Spirit assures us that we are children of God. He helps us to pray to him as our heavenly Father. And he empowers us to live as Jesus wants us to live and to make him known in the world.

At Pentecost, the Holy Spirit had been poured out on the Jewish believers in Jerusalem. And now, in a way that is reminiscent of Pentecost, the Holy Spirit is poured out on the Gentile believers in Caesarea. The outward sign was that they were speaking in tongues and praising God. It was a spectacular and visible sign to confirm that Gentiles too could enjoy the benefits of Christ's saving work. Gentiles were now included in the people of God alongside Jews. It was a watershed moment in history; a truly astonishing event. And in recognition of that fact, Peter orders that they be baptised.

Baptism is the outward sign of the inward cleansing from sin that is ours through faith in Jesus. It's the sign of membership of God's family. Peter gives that sign to these new believers. And the invitation to Peter to stay with them for a few days and enjoy their hospitality was a demonstration of the unity they now shared in Christ.

Conclusion

For those of us who are believers, it doesn't matter where we were born, it doesn't matter the colour of our skin or the way we speak, we are all members of God's people, through faith in Jesus. We are each loved by God and precious to him. And we are all united to one another as brothers and sisters in his family, through Christ.

Christianity is about faith in Jesus not ethnicity. God does not show favouritism. Everyone who believes in Jesus receives forgiveness for sins. And the Holy Spirit is given to Jews and Gentiles alike.

The invitation to you, if you wouldn't yet call yourself a Christian, is to come and take your place among God's people and be part of this wonderful multicultural family that he is building, through faith in Jesus. Please don't leave here today without finding out more. Come and take a copy of Luke's Gospel. Speak with someone about Jesus. And if you would like to, please do come and speak with me after the service and I would love to tell you more.

But for now, let's pray.

Loving Father, thank you that the good news of Jesus is for Jew and Gentile alike, and for making us members together of your family through faith in Jesus. Please help us to embrace one another in love as brothers and sisters in Christ. And help us to show our love for one another through our hospitality and in other practical ways. Please would visitors see your love among us and be drawn to Christ. And would we glorify your name as we work together to make Christ known here in Hastings. We ask it in his name. Amen.