

Acts 10:1-23a

Introduction

I wonder whether you can think of a significant encounter that has shaped your life. Perhaps, looking back, you can remember a conversation with someone that led to a change of job and a house move. Perhaps, you might think back to the moment you first met the person you married. Or a teacher at school who ignited your passion for a particular subject that has remained with you. And *this* encounter that we're reading about in the book of Acts was a pivotal moment in the life of the church, which has shaped the mission of the church, and the world, ever since.

The passage we're reading this morning is still part of the build-up. God is in full control. Like a grandmaster of chess moving his pieces on a chessboard, he's positioning the two key people, Cornelius and the apostle Peter. He's bringing them together and getting them ready for the moment they meet. And the story begins with Cornelius. In the first part of our passage, he speaks to Cornelius through a vision and prompts him to send for Peter. That's our first heading: God prompts Cornelius to send for Peter.

God prompts Cornelius to send for Peter

Let's read the first couple of verses again to set the scene. Verse 1. **At Caesarea there was a man named Cornelius, a centurion in what was known as the Italian Regiment. He and all his family were devout and God-fearing; he gave generously to those in need and prayed to God regularly.**

Caesarea was an important city. Herod the Great named it after Caesar Augustus, and it served as the centre of Roman administration in the province of Judea. It was the most Roman of all the cities of Judea and had distinctly Roman culture and architecture, much of which still survives. The remains of an aqueduct, a theatre and a very impressive man-made harbour can still be seen today. It was a treasured city and the people who lived there were mainly Gentiles.

So, let's look at a map again. Last week, the story started with Peter leaving Jerusalem and visiting Lydda. That's where the risen Jesus had healed a paralysed man through him. From there, Peter went to Joppa, where a believer called Tabitha had died. And we read how Jesus had raised her to life in response to Peter's prayer. Each of those miracles had resulted in huge numbers of people putting their faith in Jesus. Through Peter, Jesus was building his church. And we left Peter in Joppa in the house of a tanner named Simon. Caesarea is here, about 30 miles north of Joppa. And that's where Cornelius lives.

Cornelius is a distinctly Roman name. He was a centurion, which meant that he served as an officer in the army and commanded a force of 100 men. He was a hardened soldier, who had authority. The fact that he served in the illustrious Italian Regiment means that he was Italian by birth and part of the inner circle, at the heart of the military establishment. He was a Roman citizen, loyal to Caesar, who would have been highly esteemed in Roman society.

But what stands out about him is what Luke tells us in verse 2. He and all his family were devout and God-fearing. A Gentile like Cornelius couldn't become a Jew. But to be known as a God-fearer meant that this Roman centurion had come to worship the God of Israel as the one true God. And Luke tells us that all his family were devout and God-fearing too. Cornelius led his whole family in devotion to the God of Israel. They would have attended synagogue and lived as much as they could by Jewish law. And he clearly had great affection for the Jewish people; Luke tells us that he gave generously to those who in need, meaning the Jewish poor. And he was in the habit of praying regularly to God. In many ways, he is an exemplary believer. And it was during one of those times of prayer that God spoke to Cornelius through a vision. Look at verse 3. **One day at about three in the afternoon he had a vision. He distinctly saw an angel of God, who came to him and said, 'Cornelius!'**

Cornelius stared at him in fear. 'What is it, Lord?' he asked.

The angel answered, 'Your prayers and gifts to the poor have come up as a memorial offering before God. Now send men to Joppa to bring back a man named Simon who is called Peter. He is staying with Simon the tanner, whose house is by the sea.'

When the angel who spoke to him had gone, Cornelius called two of his servants and a devout soldier who was one of his attendants. He told them everything that had happened and sent them to Joppa.

Three in the afternoon was a Jewish time of prayer, and in verse 30 Cornelius confirms that he was in his house praying when the angel appeared to him. Understandably, he was terrified. I imagine it would take a lot to strike fear into the heart of a hardened soldier like Cornelius. But seeing an angel would certainly seem to do it. It's a detail that might challenge the way we think of angels. He asks, 'What is it, Lord?' And the angel tells him that God has taken note of him. His prayers and gifts to the poor have come to God's attention. They are confirmation that his devotion to the Lord is genuine. Yet something was lacking.

Cornelius had come to worship the God of Israel. He was seeking to live by God's law. His affection for the Jewish people was evident. And he regularly sought God in prayer. But if he was truly to know God and enjoy his blessing, that wasn't enough. Something was lacking. He needed to hear the message about Jesus. No one can know God and enjoy his blessing except through Jesus. And that's why the angel tells him to send for Peter. Cornelius needs to hear the gospel message. And he needs the apostle Peter to come and tell it to him.

God calls people to himself through hearing the message about Jesus. He's still at work in the world today, prompting people to find out about Jesus. In fact, in this country now, there seems to be a greater hunger to find out about Jesus than there has been for many years. And perhaps God is prompting *you* too to find out about Jesus and the relationship with God that he alone can give you. He may not have sent you an angel, which may come as something of a relief if Cornelius's reaction is anything to go by. Perhaps he's prompting

you through a friend, or someone in your family, or through an inner feeling in your heart. But perhaps he's prompting you, today, to find out about Jesus. The good news is that you don't need to send for an apostle – which is just as well because the last of them died nearly 2000 years ago. You can't send for an apostle, but you *do* have the apostles' message preserved for you in the Bible. You just need to read it. A good place to start would be to read Luke's Gospel.

Luke wrote two books. This book of Acts that we're reading today is his second book. The first is his Gospel. It records the things that Jesus said and did and all that happened to him. I've got lots of copies of it here and I would love to give one to you if you come and speak to me after the service. We don't need to have a long conversation, if you don't want to. You can just ask me for a copy of Luke's Gospel, and I'll be very pleased to give it to you.

And that's just a start. Perhaps you came to church with a friend. You can talk to *them* about Jesus. If you live locally, you can keep coming along to our church services. We would love you to do that. And if you pay attention to the sermons, you'll hear the message about Jesus being preached. If you pay attention to the words of the songs we sing, you'll hear the good news of Jesus being sung. Please do that. Keep coming back. And if you don't live locally, find a church near you that faithfully teaches the Bible, and go there.

God prompted Cornelius to send for Peter and hear the message about Jesus. All that Cornelius had to do was obey, which he did. And that's all that you need to do. You just need to follow God's prompting and be prepared to listen. Please do that.

Well, we're going to leave Cornelius where he is, in Caesarea, for now. Being a Roman centurion, with all the authority he possessed, he gives instructions to two servants and one attendant and sends them on their way to find Peter. And as they make the journey, our attention switches now to Peter himself, in Joppa. Just as God had prompted Cornelius to send for Peter, he now prompts Peter to go to Cornelius. That's our second heading: God prompts Peter to go to Cornelius.

God prompts Peter to go to Cornelius

Please look down again at verses 9 to 16.

About noon the following day as they were on their journey and approaching the city, Peter went up on the roof to pray. He became hungry and wanted something to eat, and while the meal was being prepared, he fell into a trance. He saw heaven opened and something like a large sheet being let down to earth by its four corners. It contained all kinds of four-footed animals, as well as reptiles and birds. Then a voice told him, 'Get up, Peter. Kill and eat.'

'Surely not, Lord!' Peter replied. 'I have never eaten anything impure or unclean.'

The voice spoke to him a second time, 'Do not call anything impure that God has made clean.'

This happened three times, and immediately the sheet was taken back to heaven.

It's not unheard of for a man to fall asleep with an empty stomach and dream about food. But this is more than hunger at work. And Peter isn't sleeping. He receives this vision while he's praying, just as Cornelius had done the day before. The sight of heaven opening and something like a large sheet being let down to earth is a sign that this is from God. And Peter hears a voice addressing him. The sheet is full of every kind of living creature, whether clean or unclean. Peter was a Jew. Some of these animals he was permitted to eat according to Jewish law. But others were off limits. They were prohibited. But the voice says, **'Get up, Peter. Kill and eat.'** In other words, 'Take your pick, Peter. Eat whatever you want.' It's probably the last thing Peter expected to hear, and he seems to see it as a test of his obedience.

'Surely not, Lord!' he replies. 'I have never eaten anything impure or unclean.'

But the voice says a second time, **'Do not call anything impure that God has made clean.'**

And we're told that this happened a third time before the sheet was taken back to heaven.

When something happens three times in the Bible, it's important. And with Peter, things often seem to come in threes. Three times he disowned Jesus before his crucifixion. Three times by the Sea of Galilee the risen Jesus restored Peter by asking, 'Do you love me?' and commissioned him to care for his sheep. And now, three times, Peter hears a voice telling him that what had been considered unclean has now been made clean. This is important.

The food laws that labelled certain foods clean and unclean were designed to keep Israel distinct from its neighbours. They were a kind of boundary marker that set the Israelites apart from the Gentiles, or non-Jews, around them. They marked them out as different. But now, God was saying these food laws no longer applied. The boundary markers between Jews and Gentiles had been removed. And, unsurprisingly, Peter's not too sure what to make of it.

Verse 17. While Peter was wondering about the meaning of the vision, the men sent by Cornelius found out where Simon's house was and stopped at the gate. They called out, asking if Simon who was known as Peter was staying there.

While Peter was still thinking about the vision, the Spirit said to him, 'Simon, three men are looking for you. So get up and go downstairs. Do not hesitate to go with them, for I have sent them.'

While Peter is mulling it all over and trying to make sense of what he'd seen and heard, the three men from Cornelius arrive. They stop at the house of Simon the tanner and ask if Peter is staying there. Tanners worked with the skins of dead animals. And scrupulous Jews wouldn't go near them. Their contact with dead animals made them ritually unclean. Seemingly, Peter doesn't have such scruples, but nonetheless, as a Jew, what happens next would have been deeply uncomfortable for him.

Verse 21. Peter went down and said to the men, 'I'm the one you're looking for. Why have you come?'

The men replied, 'We have come from Cornelius the centurion. He is a righteous and God-fearing man, who is respected by all the Jewish people. A holy angel told him to ask you to come to his house so that he could hear what you have to say.'

To stay in the house of a *Jew* who was considered unclean because of his trade was one thing. But to go to the house of an unclean Gentile was something else altogether. No devout Jew would enter the house of a Gentile. Jews kept to themselves and despised Gentiles. So, to go to the house of Cornelius would have been deeply uncomfortable for Peter.

But this interruption has come just as he was thinking about the meaning of the vision he had seen, and the words he had heard: **'Do not call anything impure that God has made clean.'** He still has the words of the Spirit ringing in his ears: **'Do not hesitate to go with them, for I have sent them.'** He was only going to discover what this was all about by obeying God's prompting. So, we're told in verse 23: **Then Peter invited the men into the house to be his guests.**

It's a big moment that required a massive shift in Peter's worldview. He still doesn't know where this is going. He doesn't know how this is all going to turn out. But God was pushing him out of his comfort zone to take the gospel to a Gentile named Cornelius. And where the Lord leads, we must follow.

That's the challenge of these verses for those of us who are believers. God is still sending us out into the world today to share the gospel with those with whom we don't normally associate; even people we might feel inclined to steer clear of. These verses are teaching us not to consider anyone to be beyond the scope of God's love. The gospel is for all people, everywhere. The invitation to come and be part of God's people through faith in Jesus is for everyone, even those we don't normally associate with. And God is continually pushing us out of our comfort zones to go and speak with them.

Who might he be sending you to with the good news of Jesus? Perhaps it's someone on your street. Or someone at school. Or someone you see when you're walking the dog. You may not know where it will lead. You may not know how it will all turn out. It might make you feel deeply uncomfortable. But like Peter, all that's required is your obedience. Will you go? If the opportunity arises to speak with them about Jesus, will you take it? If it would help, I would love to give *you* a copy of Luke's Gospel too. Not for yourself. But to give to someone else, who might be willing to read it and talk with you about it. Please just come and ask me after the service if you would like one.

Conclusion

So then, these verses are building up to this significant encounter between Cornelius and the apostle Peter. We'll finally get to it next week. It's a pivotal moment that would shape Cornelius' life and the life of the church from then on. And our lives are filled with the potential for significant encounters every day, if we will step out of our comfort zones and speak with those around us about Jesus. Who knows, in the week ahead, you and I could

have conversations that might shape someone's life forever. Isn't that a thought. We may not know where those conversations will lead. All that's required is our obedience.

And if you wouldn't yet call yourself a Christian, please don't miss the opportunity to find out about Jesus today. Please do come and ask me for a copy of Luke's Gospel after the service, and I would be delighted to give one to you.

Let's pray.

Loving Father, thank you for making us part of your kingdom through faith in Jesus. We thank you for those who first told us the good news of Jesus and for some, we may not know the courage that took. But please help us to do likewise, and to step out of our comfort zones to share the good news with others. And as we do, please be at work through us to change people's lives for ever through faith in Jesus. We ask it in his name. Amen.