

Acts 11:1-18

Introduction

I suspect there are many things that we take for granted each day and fail to recognise the monumental impact they had when they were first introduced. One example might be the railway. We take for granted that we can buy a train ticket and travel anywhere in the country in a matter of hours. We might complain about the delays and cancellations and the cost of tickets, but nonetheless, we take for granted that we can do it. We easily forget how significant it was when the steam train was invented by Richard Trevithick, back in 1803. Before there were trains, travelling any significant distance took a long time. You could only travel as fast as a horse could carry you, which meant that most people didn't travel very far. But with the invention of the steam train, journeys that took days now took a matter of hours. Without trains, there was no such thing as a daily commute to work, a day trip to London, a weekend break, or overnight mail delivery. But with the invention of the steam train all those things, and more, became possible. The invention of the steam train transformed the world. But we can take all of that for granted.

And that's just one example. We could come up with many other things that we take for granted. And one of them is the preaching of the gospel by Christians all over the globe. The fact that the good news of Jesus, the Jewish Christ or Messiah, is preached to people of all nations is not big news. We take it for granted that the gospel is for everyone. So, it can be difficult for us to appreciate the huge significance of the events we're reading about in this book of Acts. That's why we've just been told about them for the third time. As it was read for us just now, you might have been thinking that you've heard all this before. We were told the same things last week and the week before that. It might seem like unnecessary repetition. But the repetition underlines how important this story is to help us grasp its monumental significance. And as we read the story again today, the first thing we need to grasp is the moral offence of Peter's actions. That's our first heading: The moral offence of Peter's actions.

The moral offence of Peter's actions

Please look down again at verses 1 to 3. **The apostles and the believers throughout Judea heard that the Gentiles also had received the word of God. So when Peter went up to Jerusalem, the circumcised believers criticised him and said, 'You went into the house of uncircumcised men and ate with them.'**

Peter's taking flak, and the bone of contention is that he had gone to the house of uncircumcised men. As far as the believers in Jerusalem were concerned, what he'd was done wrong. And their complaint revolves around circumcision or the lack of it. Luke makes that clear in the way he records the details. He makes it clear that the criticism of Peter was levelled by the circumcised believers on the basis that he had visited and eaten with uncircumcised men. So, if we're to understand the reason for their unhappiness with Peter, we need to understand the significance of circumcision.

Circumcision was another boundary marker that separated the Jews from the non-Jewish nations around them. But it wasn't an arbitrary boundary marker. God had given circumcision to Abraham and his descendants as a physical sign that they belonged to him. It was a sign of the covenant between them, that from all the nations of the world, he would be their God, and they would be his people. And that covenant had a strong moral dimension. As God's people, the Jews were to be holy as God is holy. They were to live a certain way, in obedience to God's law, reflecting his moral character. And *that* was the biggest difference between the Jews and the non-Jewish nations that had surrounded them throughout their history. They lived by very different moral frameworks.

The people of the surrounding nations were idolaters. They didn't know the God of Israel. They worshipped a whole host of pagan gods, many of whom were fertility gods, who they believed controlled the weather and the harvest, as well as childbirth and the reproduction of their livestock. And their worship of these fertility gods often involved sexual acts, which was one of the most obvious areas of difference between them and the Jews. The Bible teaches clearly that the only place for sexual activity is within marriage, between one man and one woman. It condemns all other sexual activity as immoral. Yet the pagan nations that surrounded Israel throughout its history routinely incorporated immoral sexual practices into their worship. Likewise, the Greco-Roman world that Peter lived in was notoriously permissive when it came to sexual practices, much like Western society is today, if not worse.

And that's why Peter's actions were so offensive to the Jewish believers in Jerusalem. He was a Jew, who was called to be holy as God is holy. Yet he had entered the house of a Gentile, whose culture upheld very different moral standards to those found in the Bible. He had shared meals with them, which almost certainly meant eating food they regarded to be unclean. To their minds, he had compromised himself. Their offence wasn't simply to do with racial prejudice. It was moral offence. In their eyes, Peter had failed to keep himself morally pure. He had defiled himself through his association with unclean Gentiles. That's why they're so unhappy with him. And in the verses that follow, Peter clearly understands the gravity of the situation. But he defends his actions by pointing to God's purpose behind them. And that's our next heading: The divine purpose behind Peter's actions.

The divine purpose behind Peter's actions

Verse 4 says: **Starting from the beginning, Peter told them the whole story...**

The details are repeated for us a third time to emphasise that this was God's doing. First, Peter describes the vision he saw and explains how he had needed to have his own attitude changed about what he considered to be clean and unclean. Then, he describes the arrival of the three men who came from Caesarea. He passes on their account of the angel who appeared to Cornelius, telling him to send for someone called Simon Peter, who would tell him and his household how to be saved. This had all confirmed to Peter that God wanted him to offer Cornelius salvation through faith in Jesus, which he did. And finally, he describes the pouring out of the Holy Spirit on Cornelius and his household, in a way that was reminiscent of Pentecost. Just as the first disciples, who were all Jews, had received the

Holy Spirit in Jerusalem on the day of Pentecost, now Peter had seen the same Spirit being poured out on these Gentile believers in Caesarea, whom the Jews regarded to be unclean.

Although, by now, this is all very familiar to us, it's an amazing story of God's direction and activity. And as Peter recounts these events, he tells how he had remembered the words of Jesus. He recalls how Jesus had told his disciples: **'John baptised with water, but you will be baptised with the Holy Spirit.'** And Peter had understood that this is what was happening. The new age of the Spirit had come. The gift of the Spirit had been given firstly to Jewish believers. And staggeringly, the same gift had now been given to unclean Gentile believers too!

Then Peter reaches the climax of his argument in verse 17: **'So if God gave them the same gift he gave us who believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I to think that I could stand in God's way?'** This was not a hare-brained scheme of Peter's. This was God's doing. God was doing something new. And who was he to stand in God's way?

Peter had grasped how massive this was. It was monumental. God was doing a new thing and calling godless and immoral Gentiles into his church alongside Jews, all through faith in Jesus. And he's still doing it all around the world today.

We don't have to look very hard to find testimonies of people who have come to faith in Jesus from all kinds of backgrounds: drug dealing, prostitution, alcoholism, sexual promiscuity, gang violence... you name it, the list goes on and on. In the fourth century A.D., St Augustine was converted from a lifestyle of sensuality and hedonism and became one of the greatest theologians in Western history. More recently, you may have heard of Nicky Cruz, who was converted from life in a New York street gang in the 1950s, and became an evangelist. His story was told in the book, *The Cross and the Switchblade*. More recently still, Clare Heath-Whyte has written *Last on God's List*, a book about someone called Jason Armstrong and his conversion from a life of drug-addiction and the occult. Those are just three names among many. And in our *own* experience, many *here* can testify how God has called *us* out of godless and morally questionable lifestyles.

The salvation that Jesus has won isn't for those who think they are morally pure, it's for those who know they aren't, both Jew and Gentile alike. It's not for those who think they are morally upright, but for those who know they are morally bankrupt. Jesus said, **'It is not the healthy who need a doctor but those who are ill. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance.'** (Luke 5:31-32). And what Peter has come to understand is that Jesus had come to call Gentiles as well as Jews. At Caesarea, God was doing a new thing, that would transform the world forever. And as the Jewish believers in Jerusalem listen to Peter, they get it. And they praise God for his grace. That's our final heading: The amazing grace revealed through Peter's actions.

The amazing grace revealed through Peter's actions

Please look down again at verse 18. **When they heard this, they had no further objections and praised God, saying, 'So then, even to Gentiles God has granted repentance that leads to life.'**

As the Jewish believers in Jerusalem listen to Peter's story, they are silenced. They have no further objections.

Notice that repentance that leads to eternal life is a gift that God grants. It all comes from him. These Jewish believers had understood *their* need of repentance that leads to life. But they never expected God to grant such a wonderful gift to rebellious, sexually immoral, idol-worshipping pagans too. But that is what God had done. He had granted life to Gentiles. It was all grace: a wholly undeserved gift. And they praise God for it. And this gift is still available today.

It's a gift that is received by faith in Jesus. Whether you're a Jew or a Gentile, you and I cannot receive forgiveness and eternal life any other way than through faith in him. We cannot receive eternal life by being good and deserving it. You and I can only receive forgiveness and life by acknowledging that we are sinners who could never deserve it, no matter how hard we tried. But if you can acknowledge that to be true, the invitation of the gospel is to come to the cross as you are, sin and all, and be washed clean, through faith in Jesus. It's the invitation to trust that Jesus has paid for your sin in full, so that you can receive eternal life as a gift of God's grace. It's what we'll sing about in our next song: *Wonderful grace that gives what I don't deserve, pays me what Christ has earned, then lets me go free.*

But notice that the invitation to 'come as you are' isn't an invitation to 'stay as you are'. The gift that God holds out to us in Christ is a gift that involves repentance. Verse 18 again: **'So then, even to Gentiles God has granted repentance that leads to life.'**

To repent is to have a radical change of life. It means turning your back on your old way of life, when you lived as you pleased, without reference to Jesus. And it means living a new life, in submission to Jesus as Lord, in obedience to his words, contained in the Bible. It's to have an about turn and to start living with a radically new devotion to Jesus.

Conclusion

This is the work that God is doing in the world today. He's granting the gift of repentance that leads to life to Jews and Gentiles alike, through faith in his Son, Jesus Christ. He's doing that work all over the world, calling people of all different nations and cultures.

The sign of membership of God's people is no longer circumcision but the indwelling of the Holy Spirit and faith in Jesus. The way to be counted part of God's people is not scrupulous law keeping and becoming Jewish, it's by coming to Jesus. And, today, God is drawing people to his Son all around the world through the preaching of the gospel. We can so easily take that work for granted. But our response, like that of the Jewish believers in Jerusalem, should be praise.

It is astonishing that God should include undeserving sinners like you and me in his great work of salvation. Of course, it's what God intended all along. In the very first book of the Bible, he promised Abraham that all peoples on earth would be blessed through him. (Genesis 12:3). And as we look at the world around us today, we can see it happening, as

God grants the blessings of eternal life to people of all nations, through faith in Jesus. This story, repeated three times for us in the book of Acts, is taking us back to where it all started, when the gospel burst out from Jerusalem to unclean Gentiles like us. And it should move us to praise God for his wonderful grace to us in Christ. How can we read this story and not be bursting with praise for such a gracious and glorious God!

If you wouldn't yet call yourself a Christian, this grace is available to you too. No one is excluded. It doesn't matter what kind of background he might be calling you out of. He's calling you to come as you are to the cross of Christ and receive eternal life, through repentance and faith. Please don't pass up that invitation. It's the most wonderful invitation you will ever receive.

Let's pray.

Loving Father, thank you for your grace to undeserving sinners like us. Thank you for drawing us to yourself through faith in Jesus and for granting us repentance that leads to life. Please fill our hearts with love for you. And please continue your work through us, as we proclaim the gospel here in Hastings, that others too might receive repentance that leads to life as a gracious gift from you. We ask it in Jesus' name. Amen.