

SERMON – 06/05/18
(ST JAMES' CHURCH, 8 & 10AM)

Texts: **Acts 10:44-48**
 John 15:9-17

Focus of text: God chooses the Gentiles.
Aim of sermon: To use the story of Peter's visit to
 Cornelius' house as a model of how
 God does new things.
Title: God's love overcomes barriers.

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May the word of God be spoken and heard. Amen.

Today in the passage from the Book of Acts we heard about one of the most significant events in Christian history.

Of course, the ministry, death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus was the most significant series of events for us. An astounding new thing was happening - God was among us in Jesus Christ, bringing salvation to humanity.

But at his ascension only a small number of Jewish people believed in Jesus as the Messiah and Lord of all. Before his ascension, Jesus had urged them to wait in Jerusalem for God's power to come upon them, and that happened at the Jewish festival of Pentecost.

Again, something astounding and new happened -- God's Spirit was poured out on the assembled believers in what was the second most significant event in Christian history. Many Jewish people came to believe in Jesus that day. And from that time the number of Jewish Christian believers grew day by day as Christians, empowered by God's Spirit, shared the good news of Jesus with others.

But then what I would call the third most significant event took place - a remarkable event that changed Christianity from being a Jewish sect into a world religion. This is the event that we heard about in our first reading today - it was like a Gentile Pentecost. We don't have a special celebration to commemorate this event and that's why I want to reflect on just how significant it was in the development of the Church. And to explain that, I will briefly describe what happened. It's written about in chapters 10 and 11 of the Book of Acts, of which we heard just a small portion in our reading today. I urge you to read those chapters for yourselves, but I'll give my own summary of them now, so that we understand how remarkably God overcame a barrier that had been so rigidly set between Jews and Gentiles - until that day. Again, God did a new and astounding thing.

Following some attacks on Christians in Jerusalem, the apostle Peter had been travelling through Israel telling people about Jesus and healing people through the power of God.

Once, when he was staying in Joppa, he was fasting and praying and as he did so he saw a vision.

Something like a large sheet was coming down from heaven, being lowered by its four corners – and it came close to him.

As he looked at it closely, he saw four-footed animals – many of them unclean animals, not fit to be eaten by an observant Jew.

And he heard a voice saying, “Get up, Peter! Kill and eat.”

To this instruction Peter replied, “No, Lord; for nothing unclean has ever touched my mouth”.

(He kept all the Jewish food purity laws.)

But the same voice spoke from heaven and said: “What God has made clean, you must not call unclean.”

This happened three times; then everything was pulled up again into heaven.

At that very moment some men arrived from Caesarea.

They had been sent by a Roman centurion named Cornelius, who was a good man with an active interest in the Jewish faith.

He also had had a vision prompting him to send to Joppa for a man called Peter and invite him to come to his home.

Jews considered Gentiles to be unclean because of the food they ate and the idols and images they had, so this made Peter think of the vision he’d just had and God’s words to him, “What God has made clean, you must not call unclean.”

Even though Cornelius was a Gentile, Peter sensed that God wanted him to go to Cornelius’s home, so that he could tell him about Jesus.

And the next day he set off for Caesarea with the men and some other Jewish believers.

When he got to Cornelius’s house, Peter told the group that had gathered there about Jesus.

And while he was still speaking the Holy Spirit came in power upon those who were present.

The Jewish believers who had come with Peter were astounded that God’s Spirit was at work in this way among uncircumcised Gentiles.

They had always thought of Jews as God’s chosen people and Gentiles - non-Jews - as separated from God.

But now it was clear that God was working among Gentiles and accepting them in just the same way God accepted the Jews.

Even this word “astounded” indicates how extraordinary this event was for Jewish believers.

In the past, male Gentiles who came to faith in the God of Israel were required to be circumcised, to become Jews.

But it was so clear that God was doing a new thing here that the new Gentile believers were baptised without being circumcised, and Peter stayed in that house for seven days, although doing that was against the Jewish purity laws, which said that Jews should not even enter a Gentile home, let alone stay there.

This event caused a major disturbance in the early Christian Church.

Many Jewish believers still thought that Gentile believers should be circumcised, and that Peter had done the wrong thing.

But when Peter went to Jerusalem to talk to the leaders of the Church about this, they decided that Peter had done the right thing and that they would not require Gentiles who believed in Jesus to become Jews.

And that has remained the Church's policy until now.

Faith has come to us through the Jews, but we do not need to become Jewish to follow Christ, because God is the God of all people.

This story is truly miraculous.

The vision Peter had and what he witnessed at Cornelius's house were miraculous, but the most miraculous thing was that Peter was prepared to let go of a Jewish outlook that had been firmly formed for more than a thousand years - a view that was fundamental to his own self-understanding as a Jew.

He could recognise the Holy Spirit and he trusted his experience of God at work.

And the elders of the Church in Jerusalem trusted him.

This is a really important reminder to us that God does new things.

The coming of Jesus, his resurrection and ascension, the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on all people at Pentecost, and this acceptance of Gentile believers as being fully God's people - these are all new things.

Our view of God and our Christian theology can change because at its heart theology comes from reflection on the experience that people have had of God, and of God's activity in our world.

We don't want to forget the things that God did long ago, we don't want to forsake the Scriptures, but we do need to be open to what God seems to be doing now.

We need to allow that to be part of the discussion.

An example of this process is taking place in the next few days at General Synod - that's our decision-making body for the Church of Aotearoa, New Zealand and Polynesia. We've shared some discussion in this parish about the Anglican Church's debate on same-gender relationships. Now General Synod will vote on a proposal to allow Priests to perform blessings of same gender relationships, if they wish to do so and have the agreement of their diocesan Bishop.

There are people in the Church who don't think that this is the right way for us to go.

And a majority of people think that we should change our theological position on same gender relationships.

In the middle of this, almost all the members of the Anglican Church in Aotearoa, New Zealand and Polynesia want to stay together as a Church, wrestling as graciously and wisely as we can with issues where we have differing views, and not giving up on one another as a Church.

Wherever we stand on the theological spectrum, whatever we think about this particular issue, the story of what happened with Peter and Cornelius makes it clear that God can do new things and does do new things.

Of course, not every new thing is necessarily God's will for us, but this story requires us to be open to God's Spirit acting afresh in our day.

I like the fact that the Jewish people with Peter were said to be "astounded" that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out "even on the Gentiles".

They weren't "appalled" or "outraged".

It wasn't a defensive reaction.

They were "astounded", they were "amazed".

They had their frame of reference expanded by God, and it obviously took them some time to adjust to that.

But their focus was on what God was doing, and on how they needed to change as a result of that - not on whether it was a win or a loss for them or their group.

God and God's plan was at the centre of their thinking.

And God will keep on doing new things.

Perhaps we will see further changes to include young people in our worship.

Perhaps we will find an influx of people who we find it challenging to be around.

Perhaps we will come to realise that God is calling us to much more radical discipleship than we have been used to.

Let's not be appalled or outraged.

Let's not be defensive.

Let's be astounded.

Let's allow the reality of the new to change us, rather than demanding that God or others change things back to the way they were.

Let's go on growing in our discipleship.

And let's find a way to respond to the new things that God is doing with willing hearts, grateful that we have a God who is alive and acts today.

Amen.