

New world, old world
Bible reading: Acts 11.1-18

Peter said, "If then God gave them the same gift that he gave us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could hinder God?" When they heard this, they were silent: and they praised God, saying, "Then God has given even to Gentiles the repentance that leads to life." Acts 11.17-18

A Bank Holiday for VE Day — a salutary reminder of the courage and sacrifice of earlier generations (though it all seems rather odd in today's circumstances). I don't think VE Day meant much to my mum — my dad was on a ship in the Indian Ocean, and it was another year before he got back (I've still got the telegram she kept!). I've been reading the wartime diaries of Nella Last, immortalized by the incomparable Victoria Wood in *Housewife*, 49. In 1941, she was looking ahead to the new world after the war with some trepidation: "So many have to 'put their hand into the hand of God and go forth into the Unknown.' Nowadays, they talk of the 'world after the war.' I wonder how many years it will take to clear up the mess, before even beginning to build. The *waste* appals me, of effort and suffering and endeavour, of lives and all that could make life lovely and gracious, and above all, the waste of peace, of calm to think." VE Day itself, she recalls, felt a bit flat: "I looked on my shelf and said, 'Well, dash it, we *must celebrate somehow* — I'll open this tin of pears,' and I did."

In today's reading, Peter is back in Jerusalem, looking back and reflecting on the extraordinary events in Caesarea. The church back home was getting worried: what was he up to, down by the dangerous sea? The Cornelius episode is a pivotal moment for the early church, poised between the old world and the new — that's why Luke spends so much time on it. So this is a good moment to look back and reflect on Peter's story from the point of view of the different characters within it. Use all or part of this as it suits you— and take the opportunity to reflect prayerfully and thankfully on your own part in the unfolding drama that we're living through in God's world.

Mission on the Margins (Acts 10)

Acts 10 offers a unique view of mission out on the margins – told from both sides of the picture. Luke's narrative here alternates between Peter's viewpoint and Cornelius's.

- Start with Cornelius (10.1–8). Who makes the first move? (10.4-6) Mission is often described as "finding out what God is doing, and getting in on the act" — and that's very much what happens here.
- Who do you find it easiest to identify with? Probably for most of us, it's Cornelius: we're Gentiles, we know the Gospel is for us; we just want Peter to just get on with it.

- But Luke won't let us get away with that: he walks us through Peter's dilemma step by step, slowing down the action (10.9–23) so that we can sense Peter's hesitations and fears.
- For Gentile readers, Peter's dilemma looks like a "Jewish" issue — which makes it somebody else's problem. But it was the Bible that convinced Peter it was "sacrilegious" (taboo) for him to eat with Gentiles (10.28) — cf. Leviticus 11.
- Note the role of hospitality in this story. The Greek *xenos* means equally "stranger", "host" and "guest" — so who is the stranger here? Who is the guest? Spot the slow and deliberate crossing of thresholds. Think about the implications of inviting the strangers into my world (10.23) — then allowing myself to go with them into theirs (10.25). Which is easier? Why? What happens when we invite people "to come to church"? What happens when we accept their invitation to go out into their world?
- And what happens when Peter arrives (10.24-29)? Faced with Cornelius' friends, expectantly awaiting a word from God, Peter only has one story to tell — though up to this point he hadn't realized that *this* story, the testimony of Jesus' disciples, is god news for Romans as well as for Jews (10.34–43). So who gets converted here? Cornelius? Or Peter? Or both?
- And finally, note the role of the Holy Spirit in this story (10.44-48). What is the relationship between apostolic mission and the work of the Spirit?

Bringing It All Back Home (Acts 11.1-18)

By telling this story in slow motion, Luke forces us to think more carefully about the relationship between new and the old, centre and margins.

- Peter could have stayed there, out on the margins, watching God at work. But he doesn't. Why? What makes him go back to report on his actions to the home church? (11.1-2)
- And how do we configure what's going on in Jerusalem? What kind of reactions does Peter get? (11.3) This is not a debate between "Christians" and "Jews" but a debate *within* the church, testing the relationships (authority, companionship, trust) between fresh expressions and traditional structures, between centre and margins.
- How does Peter tell his story? (11.4-17) What's different this time around? How does Peter learn through this process of shared discernment? Listening and silence (11.18) play an important role here, as the centre seeks to hear what God is doing out on the margins? But Peter also gains new insight into his experience in Caesarea through taking the risk of coming back to the centre, submitting his experience to the process of shared discernment (11.16).

The place where we are, at this apparent edge, is where God is doing new things. And those who daily see the new things that God is doing

in the world have the obligation toward God and toward the rest of the Christian world to go back to the old centers, which often have lost much of their vision, taking to them our renewed vision of what God is doing today. [Justo Gonzalez]

God bless, Loveday

Sir Francis Drake's prayer: *O Lord, when thou givest to thy servants to endeavour in any great matter, Grant us also to know that it is not the beginning but the continuing of the same until it be thoroughly finished that yieldeth the true glory, through him who for the finishing of thy work laid down his life, Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.*

(From the Order of Service for VE Day, on the Church of England website).