

'God has granted even the Gentiles the repentance that leads to life.' Acts 11.18

Most of us are dragged kicking and screaming into the truth. As T.S. Eliot famously wrote 'Humankind cannot bear very much reality'. But this is what the Holy Spirit does – lead us, usually most uncomfortably, into the truth, the truth that sets us free. But so often, as with Peter so with us, we prefer the security of our comforting illusions. We prefer to see the world, ourselves, others – even God- as we *choose* to see them. Auden captured this well when he wrote 'We would rather be ruined than changed. We would rather die in our dread than climb the cross of the moment and see our illusions die.'

Dear Peter, was already - by the time we meet him in Acts 11 - used to seeing his illusions die. He had 'known' – or so he believed – that the Messiah should never have to suffer and die and had told Jesus so before he was fiercely rebuked as 'Satan' for saying so. He had 'known' – or so he believed- that he above all other apostles would never deny or disown Jesus and had said so to Jesus 'I will never disown you'. Soon afterwards we find him weeping bitterly having denied Jesus three times as Jesus had told him he would. He had 'known' – or so he believed – that a Teacher, a Rabbi should never wash the feet of his disciples, nor a Master those of his slave. So he had said to Jesus 'No, Lord, you must never wash my feet' only to hear his Master respond 'If you do not let me wash you, you have no part in me'. And he surely 'knew' when deep in tears of contrition at his threefold denial of Jesus that there could be no question of him, a serial failure as a follower of Christ, of ever becoming a leader of the followers of Christ. Only to be met days later by the Risen Lord who commissions him to 'Feed my lambs'...'Tend my sheep'...'Feed my sheep'.

And here we find him today, the inherently fallible leader, who knows above all how often he gets things wrong, the leader who has learnt –or has he?- the limits of his vision and understanding, having had his worldview turned upside down again. He has learnt, he has seen, he has witnessed that Gentiles, 'even the Gentiles' are experiencing the gift of the Holy Spirit. The God of Israel is the God of every human being. The world does not divide between clean and unclean. The world does not divide between 'goodies' and 'baddies'. I remember when I was at St. Andrews in the seventies being part of a production of 'Sweeney Todd, Demon Barber of Fleet Street'. You will know that in Victorian melodrama the custom is to cheer the hero and to boo or hiss the villain when they come on stage. We toured the show from the Town Hall here in St Andrews to Stratheden Hospital, to Old Folks Homes and to a pub as I recollect. I played Todd and was duly booed when I came on stage and the hero duly cheered. And

then we took the show to Perth Prison and played it to E Wing which was for lifers. When I came on stage as Todd, the 'Demon Barber', I was cheered and the hero was booed, and as you might imagine, the greatest hissing and booing was directed at the Judge who tries Sweeney Todd.

No, the world does not divide between 'goodies' and 'baddies'. As Solzhenitsyn wrote 'the dividing line between good and evil does not fall between different countries, different ideologies, different cultures, different peoples, it goes through every human heart.' Each of us is capable of great selflessness and good. Each of us is capable of great selfishness and indeed evil. When Simone Weil joined the Republicans in the Spanish Civil War she witnessed considerable violence and bloodshed. She later wrote how shocked and disturbed she was by the human capacity for such violence against other human beings, but 'what shocked me most', she wrote, 'was that I recognised I had within myself the seeds of such violence.'

And so we come back to the astonished exclamation of Peter and the Apostles 'God has given *even the Gentiles* the repentance that leads to life.' The *repentance* that leads to life. The inescapable doorway into life, true life, life in all its fullness is the doorway of repentance. Just as the world does not divide between 'goodies' and 'baddies', the world does not divide between those who need to repent and those who do not. It divides surely between those who *know* their need of repentance and those who do not. And we need the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of Truth, to open our eyes to help us see our need of repentance, of turning to Christ, to the Light.

Shortly before I was ordained, as part of an Industrial Mission course in Sheffield and Yorkshire, I went down a mine, the deepest in England and spent the shift with the miners. It was an eye-opener, and on the coal face there was very little light but the light on our helmets. We spent hours in considerable darkness. I remember coming up in the cage and eventually into the daylight which was dazzling, almost unbearable. It was only when my eyes adapted to the daylight that I could see how filthy I and everyone else was, covered in coal dust and grime. When we were in the darkness we could not see this. Only in the light could we see this. The Psalmist writes 'In his light, we see light.' When Isaiah encounters the glory of God in the Temple, he can suddenly see for the first time both his own need and the need of God's people to repent. It is only in the light of the glory of God that he sees the true state of affairs: 'Woe is me! I am lost. I am a man of unclean lips and I belong to a people of unclean lips, my eyes have seen the Lord of Hosts.'

This is the repentance that leads to life. We have to face the bad news before we can discover the Good News. In Shakespeare's tragedies, the tragic heroes were blighted by hubris – the blindness of pride. They do not see this 'flaw' in their character which precipitates the tragedy. Through their 'fall' or humiliation, like Peter, they begin to recognise the truth. Othello, Hamlet and Lear each in his own way aspires to realise as husband, as son, as father, respectively some shining ideal of human relationship. This is their hubris. For Peter it might have been the illusion 'I am actually the one true and most loyal and important disciple of Christ.' But for each of them and each of us, in the economy of God, we need to fall, we need to fail. In order truly to see, we need to have our eyes opened, to be dis-illusioned. As Mother Julian of Norwich reminds us ...'we need to fall, and to see that we have fallen, otherwise we would not know how weak and wretched we are of ourselves, nor should we know our Maker's love so wonderfully'. We need to see. We need to know our littleness and poverty of vision before the Spirit can enlarge our hearts and enlighten our minds. Like Peter and like all disciples, Jewish and Gentile ever since, we discover that the way into life is through dying, letting go of self to discover our true selves. It is in this humility that we will always know how much more there is beyond our ken than within our ken. University graduates should surely be more aware of their ignorance than school leavers are. Recently I came across a line from Rilke's poem, *The Swan*, in which he writes of '*A letting go of the land that we stand on and cling to every day*'. This is the journey of discipleship, not seeking to reinforce our own prejudices but seeking first the Kingdom of God, and led by the Spirit of Truth to be willing to let go of the ground that we stand on and cling to every day.

We enter into the new life that God has for us through the doorway of repentance, the doorway of a daily dying. Outside one of the monasteries I visited on Mount Athos were written the words: '*Unless you die before you die you will die when you die.*' Death dies by our dying, 'dying we live', writes Paul. Or as Shakespeare puts it '*And death once dead, there's no more dying then*'. God has given even the Gentiles, God has given even you and I the repentance that leads to life. So let's get better at dying that we might truly live.

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