

The two lessons we have just heard are both powerful and hugely significant examples of God revealing his truth.

The Holy Spirit is poured out upon the Gentiles, and Peter is led to this moment, this realisation that all people are equal in God's sight, by two key moments described earlier in Acts, chapter 10. Firstly, he is staying with Simon the Tanner in Joppa, and while praying he becomes hungry, at which point he has a vision of a sheet coming down from heaven, covered in four-footed animals, birds and reptiles; this is accompanied by a voice which commands him to kill and eat. He replies in a manner that he thinks displays obedience, saying, 'I have never eaten anything impure or unclean.' But the same voice issues a swift rebuke, 'Do not call anything impure that God has made clean.' Little does Peter know that the day before, some forty miles up the coast in Caesarea, a charitable and God-fearing Centurian, named Cornelius, also sees a vision in which he is commanded to send men to Joppa to fetch Peter, and welcome him in to his house. Guided by yet another vision Peter duly arrives at Cornelius's house but almost immediately, and rather awkwardly, makes the point that the law does not permit Jews to associate with gentiles. But the Holy Spirit has spoken to them both, and Cornelius observes, very simply, 'We are here in the presence of God' - and this is followed by some ten verses of Peter speaking seemingly without taking a breath, recounting Christ's story. It is well worth reading as it is the most joyful, and almost childlike stream of consciousness. Peter's enthusiasm is so great, that the Holy Spirit has to literally interrupt him, as our lesson began, 'while Peter was still speaking...' and the Spirit is poured on all.

The concepts that God can make any food clean and that Jews and gentiles are the same in His sight would have been monumental for Peter. In the space of a few days, two defining pillars of his religious practise, what he eats and who associates with, have been knocked down. I wonder if we would be willing to accept such fundamental revelations with the same joy and unquestioning faith that Peter does?

The issue of food and the law brings to mind the Pharisees condemning Christ and his disciples for eating on the Sabbath, in Matthew Chapter 12. I sometimes wonder if we are a bit hasty in our judgement of the Pharisees, and before condemning them too readily, perhaps we should ask ourselves another question; how would we have reacted to a carpenter from Nazareth claiming to be the Messiah? They were, after all, trying to live a life dedicated to God, but a bit like Peter, they clung too tightly to their own perception of God's will; Their mistake, and one we need to be wary of, was to believe that they could do it by themselves, by relying on a strict and ostentatious adherence to the custom and ceremony of the law; to forget, as our gospel states, the fundamental truth, that it is God who chooses us. It is an attitude which prompts Christ to remind them what it is all for, with those immortal words, 'I require mercy, not sacrifice'.

This highlights a dilemma that is a challenge for us; between seeking God's wisdom, studying his word, being disciplined in prayer and worship – and at the same time being open to him revealing himself to us in new and often unexpected ways; to unlearn something just as Peter did. The late dean of Peterborough, the Very Reverend Charles Taylor, put it brilliantly, 'Faith is not a fixed position, rather it is a commitment to travel.'

I don't think a willingness to travel has ever been more, living as we do, in an extremely, and sometimes violently polarised world; where someone's opinion on a single issue, can lead to them being judged, and often condemned as a whole. The church is not exempt from such tension and division; in the 1990s it was the matter of women priests and currently it is the

contentious and emotive issue of same-sex relationships. A certain vicar was recently asked for their position on this matter in a meeting with their archdeacon, and they replied with a question which they felt was more important – how can we ensure that two people who disagree can still worship in the same church and furthermore sit in the same pew? Few of you will be surprised to hear that that vicar was our very own Reverend Jon. And it is a typically wise perspective that reflects the command in our gospel reading, to love one another. Some kinds of love are easy - who we fall in love with, our family and friends – loving those we fundamentally disagree with is immeasurably more difficult. For guidance there are few better places than Paul's first letter to the Corinthians, which gives us that forensic but incredibly moving description of what love is; 'it does not dishonour others, nor does it keep any record of wrongs. Instead love always protects, always trusts, always hopes and always perseveres.'

I recently heard of a remarkable example of this at work today, in an interview with Rabbi Dr Natan Levy and Mustafa Field who both hold senior positions at the Faiths Forum for London. They were discussing the Muslim festival of Ramadan which as many of you will know, involves a pre-dawn meal known as Suhur, followed by a fast during daylight, which is broken by a nightly feast called Iftar. In recent years, to build community cohesion, Rabbis throughout the UK have invited their muslim neighbours to share Iftar, to break their fast, with them in their synagogues. This year, with the conflict in Gaza, many Jewish leaders felt it was simply too dangerous to do this. But others, including some who had never taken part, stepped up, and in spite of the obvious risks, extended the same invitation because they felt it had never been more important to do so. There were, as you can imagine, extremely difficult conversations, fiercely opposing points of view, but apparently when the tension got too great, muslim and jew were united by praying together - People at seemingly unreconcilable odds, brought together by submitting to God.

This guides us back to our gospel reading, where we are not only told what to do - to love one another - but are also told how - as God has loved us. And He has loved us in spite of the fact that we have all disagreed with him, by doing our own will rather than His, and as we admitted out loud just a few moments ago, we have done it through negligence, weakness and our own deliberate fault. And what was God's reaction to this - to love us even more deeply, by sending his only son to pay the price for our sins.

I think the lesson for us boils down to fundamental motivation; what is behind our thoughts, words and deeds, which may have the best of intentions and be very grand – but as Paul explains, again in Corinthians, we may have the gift of prophecy, we may be able to fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, we may even have a faith that can move mountains, but if we do not have love, all such things are nothing. Why? because God is love, so anything thought, said or done without love, is without God.

I would like to leave you with a simple but powerful verse from Proverbs – 'Better a dish of vegetables if love go with it, than a fat ox eaten in hatred.'
Amen.

Michael Grist, 5 May 2024