

Littlebourne Sunday 19th February 2023. Acts 10:1-23 An angel visits Cornelius and Peter's vision

Acts 10 At Caesarea there was a man named Cornelius, a centurion in what was known as the Italian Regiment. ² He and all his family were devout and God-fearing; he gave generously to those in need and prayed to God regularly. ³ One day at about three in the afternoon he had a vision. He distinctly saw an angel of God, who came to him and said, "Cornelius!" ⁴ Cornelius stared at him in fear. "What is it, Lord?" he asked. The angel answered, "Your prayers and gifts to the poor have come up as a memorial offering before God. ⁵ Now send men to Joppa to bring back a man named Simon who is called Peter. ⁶ He is staying with Simon the tanner, whose house is by the sea." ⁷ When the angel who spoke to him had gone, Cornelius called two of his servants and a devout soldier who was one of his attendants. ⁸ He told them everything that had happened and sent them to Joppa. ⁹ About noon the following day as they were on their journey and approaching the city, Peter went up on the roof to pray. ¹⁰ He became hungry and wanted something to eat, and while the meal was being prepared, he fell into a trance. ¹¹ He saw heaven opened and something like a large sheet being let down to earth by its four corners. ¹² It contained all kinds of four-footed animals, as well as reptiles and birds. ¹³ Then a voice told him, "Get up, Peter. Kill and eat." ¹⁴ "Surely not, Lord!" Peter replied. "I have never eaten anything impure or unclean." ¹⁵ The voice spoke to him a second time, "Do not call anything impure that God has made clean." ¹⁶ This happened three times, and immediately the sheet was taken back to heaven. ¹⁷ While Peter was wondering about the meaning of the vision, the men sent by Cornelius found out where Simon's house was and stopped at the gate. ¹⁸ They called out, asking if Simon who was known as Peter was staying there. ¹⁹ While Peter was still thinking about the vision, the Spirit said to him, "Simon, three^[a] men are looking for you. ²⁰ So get up and go downstairs. Do not hesitate to go with them, for I have sent them." ²¹ Peter went down and said to the men, "I'm the one you're looking for. Why have you come?" ²² The men replied, "We have come from Cornelius the centurion. He is a righteous and God-fearing man, who is respected by all the Jewish people. A holy angel told him to ask you to come to his house so that he could hear what you have to say." ²³ Then Peter invited the men into the house to be his guests.

Last week we saw how Peter, who was travelling to visit the saints in Lydda, healed Aeneas, paralysed and bed ridden for eight years. The word got around and Luke tells us in verse 35 of chapter 9 that "all those in Lydda and Sharon saw him and turned to the Lord". Then he was summoned to Joppa and raised Dorcas from the dead. Then he stayed at the house of Simon the Tanner in Joppa, and many believed in the Lord. Now in chapter 10, a new character is introduced, and Luke sets out some details about Cornelius, just as he did with Saul in chapter 9. This is not the first centurion mentioned as there is one mentioned in the Gospels. In Matthew 8 and Luke 7 the centurion is a man of faith who loves the Jews and helped build the synagogue. This Roman soldier gets the highest accolade from Jesus who says "I have not found anyone in all Israel with such great faith". Luke will have remembered that centurion and now says the same positive things about this one, who is in the elite Italian regiment made up of the most loyal soldiers, born and bred near Rome. Cornelius prays daily and is generous to the poor, which seems unusual for an officer of the occupying power posted to Judea. Caesarea was the administrative capital of the area, on the seaside as was Joppa, about 40 miles south... so a good long walk over nearly two days.

An angel visits, and naturally Cornelius is terrified, but being an officer, he stands staring and asks "What is it, Lord?" Angels give messages. In this case an encouragement to Cornelius that his deeds have been noted, and then telling him to summon Peter. Angels pass on a message from God, and they don't seem to preach the Gospel themselves. In this case, it will be up to Peter to do that.

Cornelius is told to send for Peter and where to find him. Obeying the angel he sends two household servants and a devout soldier, explaining everything to them. They obviously don't think he's mad, which might be the expected reaction from pagan Roman soldiers and servants. We may

assume some of the household were also believers in the God of Israel. So off they go, and the scene changes to Peter.

Now the roof of the house is a good place to find somewhere quiet to pray. It's midday, near lunch time. Jews traditionally prayed at 9am, 12pm and 3pm – three times a day, so this was a normal activity. Then while he's praying, he feels like lunch and asks for it to be made ready. To us, this isn't quite what a guest staying at your house would do, but we'll let that pass for now. As he becomes more hungry, he falls into a trance or state of ecstasy. He has a vision. *He saw heaven opened and something like a large sheet being let down to earth by its four corners.* ¹² *It contained all kinds of four-footed animals, as well as reptiles and birds.* ¹³ *Then a voice told him, "Get up, Peter. Kill and eat."* ¹⁴ *"Surely not, Lord!" Peter replied. "I have never eaten anything impure or unclean."* ¹⁵ *The voice spoke to him a second time, "Do not call anything impure that God has made clean."* ¹⁶ *This happened three times, and immediately the sheet was taken back to heaven.*

Peter recognises the voice of the Lord, but he's used to saying no to Jesus, rather than "yes, Lord" or "what is it?" like Cornelius. Peter has good reason to reject unclean food. Of the four footed animals Jews may eat, only those who have cloven hooves and chew the cud are acceptable – cattle, sheep, goats, deer and antelopes, but not pigs or horses, nor any other four footed animal, nor reptiles, nor birds that eat meat or carrion.. so only chickens, quails and doves. This is all clearly laid out in the Law of Moses, so Peter is within his rights to object. Being told three times is a bit of a theme with Peter and Jesus... he denied Jesus three times, was asked three times if he loved Jesus and now three times to do something the Law of Moses forbade. The key phrase was *"Do not call anything impure that God has made clean."* If God overrides the Law of Moses, that is his right for whatever God does is always right! Then he comes out of his trance. ¹⁷ *While Peter was wondering about the meaning of the vision, the men sent by Cornelius found out where Simon's house was and stopped at the gate.* ¹⁸ *They called out, asking if Simon who was known as Peter was staying there.* ¹⁹ *While Peter was still thinking about the vision, the Spirit said to him, "Simon, three men are looking for you."* ²⁰ *So get up and go downstairs. Do not hesitate to go with them, for I have sent them."* The Greek says "two men" in one early manuscripts, others have no number, but editors assumed there were three.

So these three men sent from Caesarea have come 40 miles in a day and half. Peter is wondering what the vision he saw means when he again hears the Spirit of Jesus telling him to go downstairs and go with them. Now Jews didn't associate with Gentiles, least of all Romans. Remember the parable of the Good Samaritan and how the religious Jews didn't want to touch the man robbed by thieves because it would involve them in ritual cleansing which would ruin your day! These three men called out at the gate, knowing that being invited in was something hardly any Jew would do. The Spirit says "go with them", but Peter doesn't immediately go with them: he does something extraordinary for a Jew. ²¹ *Peter went down and said to the men, "I'm the one you're looking for. Why have you come?"* ²² *The men replied, "We have come from Cornelius the centurion. He is a righteous and God-fearing man, who is respected by all the Jewish people. A holy angel told him to ask you to come to his house so that he could hear what you have to say."* ²³ *Then Peter invited the men into the house to be his guests.* At this point Peter understands what the Spirit is saying, because the centurion wants to hear what he has to say. A light bulb moment for Peter when a Roman wants to hear the Gospel which he must now connect with what Jesus said in the great commission *"Therefore go, discipling all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you."* So far the ministry of the apostles has been to the Jews. Now those considered unclean in Jewish eyes are to be taught to obey all Jesus commanded and be baptised. Peter's attitude changes and he invites

these men into the house as guests for the night. He doesn't appear to consult Simon the tanner. The house would have to be purified after these Gentiles have left.

Next week we'll see what happens next.

What can we take from this passage? The Roman occupying forces were generally hated for imposing taxes, but they kept order and didn't otherwise interfere too much in the lives of the people. Among them were good men, like Cornelius. The Roman system was that soldiers and officials were posted for relatively short periods all over the Empire... to stop anyone getting a power base and enriching themselves corruptly. The Roman ruling classes had a sense of morality based on the Greek philosophers Socrates, Plato and Aristotle, and many were fair minded men. The historical caricature of Romans being venal greedy cruel lovers of luxury is misplaced. However to rule over people meant that any trouble had to be dealt with severely... the iron fist in a velvet glove policy which nearly all empires adopted until recently. For example, Pontius Pilate as we have seen seeks to exonerate Jesus and be fair towards him, but is brow beaten by the Jews and for an easy life, lets them have their way. He behaves like a politician who knows life is cheap and people are expendable. He asks himself what advantage is there in saving the life of one of these troublesome Jews compared to having to call out the army to deal with the mob outside which might result in more unpleasantness and a bad report made to his superiors that he couldn't manage things properly. We don't know whether Peter had had any bad experiences with Romans, but like all Jews, he would have been wary of them. In our own time, there will be sections of society we are wary of – some will say we are prejudiced and others will say we are just exercising discretion and being wise to avoid trouble. As we are all made in the image of God and usually have a conscience, the outward appearance may not necessarily correspond to the inner self of those we avoid. Peter heard from Jesus what he had to do, and the report of the three men confirmed that Cornelius was not a threat, but a genuinely curious man who worshipped God, was generous to the poor, and was chosen by God to point the way for the apostles to do what Jesus taught them – teach all nations, which they weren't really doing so far.

The lesson Peter learnt and we learn from this is that when Holy Spirit reveals himself to us, the correct response, is "yes, Lord, your servant is listening" and "yes, Lord" to whatever is asked. The same as Mary's response, the same as Samuel's response. People can be fearful that God may ask them to do something that they really do not want to do, or think themselves incapable of doing. But God knows better and changes the desires of our heart and our capability to do things.

We support Amy and Kody Friesen who work overseas to bring the Gospel to people in the Middle East who are mainly Muslims. Amy came on Alpha course at St Andrew's and was filled with the Holy Spirit. She was not what I would call well educated, but God chose her and gave her the ability to learn Arabic, Hebrew, Turkish and Persian which she would have felt was impossible given how badly she did with foreign languages at school. She also found herself in countries with completely different cultures... first in Tanzania with YWAM, then Bethlehem, then where she is now, with five children, reliant on what God provides. Our natural anxiety towards doing things outside our comfort zones can be overcome by doing what God equips us to do. So if Holy Spirit prompts us to do something outside our comfort zone, we should go ahead and see how good the Lord is when our fears are removed by his perfect love. Peter got confirmation from two directions: Holy Spirit and the witness of the three men. It is wise to get confirmation so we aren't misled. For example Moses heard God's voice from the burning bush, and argued with Him. God promised to send Moses' brother Aaron who was more eloquent... and Aaron was on his way already!

Let's pray

