

## Littlebourne Chapel – Sunday 5<sup>th</sup> March 2023 – Acts 11:1-18 – Peter Hollander

*The apostles and the believers throughout Judea heard that the Gentiles also had received the word of God. <sup>2</sup> So when Peter went up to Jerusalem, the circumcised believers criticised him <sup>3</sup> and said, ‘You went into the house of uncircumcised men and ate with them.’ <sup>4</sup> Starting from the beginning, Peter told them the whole story: <sup>5</sup> ‘I was in the city of Joppa praying, and in a trance I saw a vision. I saw something like a large sheet being let down from heaven by its four corners, and it came down to where I was. <sup>6</sup> I looked into it and saw four-footed animals of the earth, wild beasts, reptiles and birds. <sup>7</sup> Then I heard a voice telling me, “Get up, Peter. Kill and eat.” <sup>8</sup> ‘I replied, “Surely not, Lord! Nothing impure or unclean has ever entered my mouth.” <sup>9</sup> ‘The voice spoke from heaven a second time, “Do not call anything impure that God has made clean.” <sup>10</sup> This happened three times, and then it was all pulled up to heaven again. <sup>11</sup> ‘Right then three men who had been sent to me from Caesarea stopped at the house where I was staying. <sup>12</sup> The Spirit told me to have no hesitation about going with them. These six brothers also went with me, and we entered the man’s house. <sup>13</sup> He told us how he had seen an angel appear in his house and say, “Send to Joppa for Simon who is called Peter. <sup>14</sup> He will bring you a message through which you and all your household will be saved.” <sup>15</sup> ‘As I began to speak, the Holy Spirit came on them as he had come on us at the beginning. <sup>16</sup> Then I remembered what the Lord had said: “John baptised with water, but you will be baptised with the Holy Spirit.” <sup>17</sup> So if God gave them the same gift he gave us who believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I to think that I could stand in God’s way?’ <sup>18</sup> When they heard this, they had no further objections and praised God, saying, ‘So then, even to Gentiles God has granted repentance that leads to life.’*

On Sunday 19<sup>th</sup> February we looked at Acts 10 where the rooftop vision of Peter was described. Peter grasped its significance when the men sent by the centurion Cornelius arrived knocking at the gate and explaining why they had come. Sometimes in the Gospels Peter (and the other disciples) are a bit slow to realise what Jesus was saying. Peter is seen as impulsive at times. However this time, he wasn’t slow and as was mentioned a few weeks ago, he did understand now what Jesus had said about bring the good news to all nations. Remember last year, after Easter, when we ended looking at Mark’s gospel, what it says in Mark 16:15-16 <sup>15</sup> *He said to them, ‘Go into all the world and preach the gospel to all creation. <sup>16</sup> Whoever believes and is baptised will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned. <sup>17</sup> And these signs will accompany those who believe: in my name they will drive out demons; they will speak in new tongues;*

Peter and those who went with him from Joppa to Caesarea discovered at Cornelius’ house that the Gentiles were filled with the Holy Spirit. Those with him were astonished. The mindset of the Jews was, and still is, that they are a chosen people, set apart from other nations, on whom God has shown special favour. As the news of resurrection of Jesus was preached in the Temple, and the synagogues, the listeners and converts were Jews. This message was seemingly for them. It wasn’t being shared with Gentiles up until now.

*Acts 10:44-48 <sup>44</sup> While Peter was still speaking these words, the Holy Spirit came on all who heard the message. <sup>45</sup> The circumcised believers who had come with Peter were astonished that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on Gentiles. <sup>46</sup> For they heard them speaking in tongues<sup>[b]</sup> and praising God. Then Peter said, <sup>47</sup> ‘Surely no one can stand in the way of their being baptised with water. They have received the Holy Spirit just as we have.’ <sup>48</sup> So he ordered that they be baptised in the name of Jesus Christ. Then they asked Peter to stay with them for a few days.*

We now come to chapter 11.

*The apostles and the believers throughout Judea heard that the Gentiles also had received the word of God. <sup>2</sup> So when Peter went up to Jerusalem, the circumcised believers criticised him <sup>3</sup> and said, 'You went into the house of uncircumcised men and ate with them.'*

To us the idea of men being separated by what had been done to their male parts shortly after birth... something invisible in polite company, seems somewhat preposterous. There is nothing in the Old Testament actually forbidding entry into a non-Jewish house. Joshua sent spies to Jericho, and they entered the house of Rahab the prostitute. David feigned madness and dwelt with the Philistines for sixteen months. Esther stayed for years at the king's palace, as did Daniel and his friends. We find numerous instances of Israelites entering and staying at the houses of Gentiles, so that prohibition seems to have been a development of the Mosaic Law created by rabbis and scholars over centuries as a preventative measure so that eating with Gentiles could be avoided. Eating food that was not prepared properly was forbidden. We can understand that much more easily as there are rules – only certain animals, fish, birds and insects can be eaten, but they must not contain blood. If you don't know how the food has been prepared or what it is, then eating it could violate the dietary laws of Moses. Violating any part, no matter how trivial, of the law of Moses was deemed sinful. So eating what we would now call non-kosher food at the house of Cornelius would be deemed sinful. Again, we see that the mindset of the Jewish converts to Christianity remained firmly rooted in every Jewish law and tradition. As Jesus told the people in his sermon on the mount in Matthew 5:17-18 <sup>17</sup> *'Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfil them. <sup>18</sup> For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished.*

Some Christians have taken this to heart, and want to follow the dietary laws of Moses... on the basis that if God told them what not to eat, it would be for their benefit, and therefore must be for our benefit also to follow these restrictions. So no pork, no shellfish, and no rabbit or hare.

Peter then repeats what Luke had already written in chapter 10. There's a lot of repetition in these two chapters, as if Luke really wanted to emphasise that the Gospel was for Jew and Gentile alike – he needed to convince the Jews reading this book more than the Gentiles. We can see that in Paul's letter to the Galatians where Jewish Christians expected Gentile converts to be circumcised, that to be the new chosen people required more than mere water baptism but this as well, and following the Jewish dietary laws. Paul tells us that Peter was still not confident that the Jews with him had taken on board the equality of Jews and Gentiles alike for all believers. Some Jewish Christians seemed to think themselves superior to Gentile Christians.

***Galatians 2*** *Then after fourteen years, I went up again to Jerusalem, this time with Barnabas. I took Titus along also. <sup>2</sup> I went in response to a revelation and, meeting privately with those esteemed as leaders, I presented to them the gospel that I preach among the Gentiles. I wanted to be sure I was not running and had not been running my race in vain. <sup>3</sup> Yet not even Titus, who was with me, was compelled to be circumcised, even though he was a Greek. <sup>4</sup> This matter arose because some false believers had infiltrated our ranks to spy on the freedom we have in Christ Jesus and to make us slaves. <sup>5</sup> We did not give in to them for a moment, so that the truth of the gospel might be preserved for you. <sup>6</sup> As for those who were held in high esteem – whatever they were makes no difference to me; God does not show favouritism – they added nothing to my message. <sup>7</sup> **On the contrary, they recognised that I had been entrusted with the task of preaching the gospel to the uncircumcised, just as Peter had been to the circumcised.** <sup>8</sup> For God, who was at work in Peter as an apostle to the circumcised, was also at work in me as an apostle to the Gentiles. <sup>9</sup> James, Cephas and John, those esteemed as pillars, gave me and Barnabas the right hand of fellowship when they recognised the grace given to me. They agreed that we should go to the Gentiles, and they to the circumcised. <sup>10</sup> All*

they asked was that we should continue to remember the poor, the very thing I had been eager to do all along.

<sup>11</sup> When Cephas came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he stood condemned. <sup>12</sup> For before certain men came from James, he used to eat with the Gentiles. But when they arrived, he began to draw back and separate himself from the Gentiles because he was afraid of those who belonged to the circumcision group. <sup>13</sup> The other Jews joined him in his hypocrisy, so that by their hypocrisy even Barnabas was led astray. <sup>14</sup> When I saw that they were not acting in line with the truth of the gospel, I said to Cephas in front of them all, 'You are a Jew, yet you live like a Gentile and not like a Jew. How is it, then, that you force Gentiles to follow Jewish customs?' <sup>15</sup> 'We who are Jews by birth and not sinful Gentiles <sup>16</sup> know that a person is not justified by the works of the law, but by faith in Jesus Christ. So we, too, have put our faith in Christ Jesus that we may be justified by faith in Christ and not by the works of the law, because by the works of the law no one will be justified. <sup>17</sup> 'But if, in seeking to be justified in Christ, we Jews find ourselves also among the sinners, doesn't that mean that Christ promotes sin? Absolutely not! <sup>18</sup> If I rebuild what I destroyed, then I really would be a law-breaker. <sup>19</sup> 'For through the law I died to the law so that I might live for God. <sup>20</sup> I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I now live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me. <sup>21</sup> I do not set aside the grace of God, for if righteousness could be gained through the law, Christ died for nothing!'

It's a whole chapter, but it emphasises how even in the early church, there are divisions. Splits on matters of tradition, theology, diet, clothing and what you do to your body were there as they are now. For many of us looking back, we can see that disagreements and divisions that seemed so important at the time, may now seem rather petty, even ludicrous.

Back to Acts 11

Peter explains what happened and then tells the believers in Jerusalem what it means.

<sup>16</sup> Then I remembered what the Lord had said: "John baptised with water, but you will be baptised with the Holy Spirit." <sup>17</sup> So if God gave them the same gift he gave us who believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I to think that I could stand in God's way?'

When God gives people the gift of the Holy Spirit manifested in the outward sign of tongues, surely then, one can recognise a fellow believer? This is the foundation of the Pentecostal movement. Yet beware! Speaking in tongues can be faked. However among the household of Cornelius it wasn't faked as probably none were aware of the phenomenon to enable them to fake it. You can only fake it, if you have seen others; not if you've never witnessed this.

Peter remembers the words of Jesus – Acts 1:5 just before he went up to heaven. *John baptised with water, but you will be baptised with the Holy Spirit.* Peter quite logically understands what happened and says "who am I to think that I can stand in God's way?" He convinces the believers in Jerusalem that the household of Cornelius and others in Caesarea are genuine converts.

<sup>18</sup> When they heard this, they had no further objections and praised God, saying, 'So then, even to Gentiles God has granted repentance that leads to life.'

It was difficult for the Jews in Jerusalem to accept that their Messiah came to save everyone, nor just the Jews. Cultural traditions are hard to break, and changes usually come from outsiders joining particular people groups. God warned the Israelites not to take foreign wives because they brought with them their customs and worship of foreign gods. We can see throughout the Old Testament

how this caused real problems in Israel and resulted in the defeat of Israel and Judah, their exile to foreign lands, and the scattering of Jews outside of their homeland. The Jews in the early church would have thought the same about letting in Gentiles with their non-Jewish ways infecting them and making them stray from their own customs and traditions. We see later in Acts 15, that the apostles had to send a letter to the Gentiles to explain that they need not be circumcised, although this is not specifically mentioned.

*<sup>24</sup> We have heard that some went out from us without our authorisation and disturbed you, troubling your minds by what they said. <sup>25</sup> So we all agreed to choose some men and send them to you with our dear friends Barnabas and Paul – <sup>26</sup> men who have risked their lives for the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. <sup>27</sup> Therefore we are sending Judas and Silas to confirm by word of mouth what we are writing. <sup>28</sup> It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us not to burden you with anything beyond the following requirements: <sup>29</sup> You are to abstain from food sacrificed to idols, from blood, from the meat of strangled animals and from sexual immorality. You will do well to avoid these things.*

So some of the dietary requirements are included! Blood should be drained from slaughtered animals (by throat cutting usually) and blood not eaten. Why is blood so significant? Without blood, animal and human life cannot continue. Leviticus 17:10-14 sets out what God said to the Israelites:

*<sup>10</sup> “I will set my face against any Israelite or any foreigner residing among them who eats blood, and I will cut them off from the people. <sup>11</sup> **For the life of a creature is in the blood,** and I have given it to you to make atonement for yourselves on the altar; it is the blood that makes atonement for one’s life. <sup>12</sup> Therefore I say to the Israelites, ‘None of you may eat blood, nor may any foreigner residing among you eat blood.’ <sup>13</sup> “Any Israelite or any foreigner residing among you who hunts any animal or bird that may be eaten must drain out the blood and cover it with earth, <sup>14</sup> because the life of every creature is its blood. That is why I have said to the Israelites, ‘You must not eat the blood of any creature, because the life of every creature is its blood; anyone who eats it must be cut off.’*

The lifeblood of Jesus gives us life; applying the blood of Jesus to any situation means it cannot be touched by the devil. The redeeming blood of Jesus is powerful to heal, to protect, to save. The blood of animals made atonement for life, and so animals sacrificed to God made atonement for sins committed. The blood of Jesus sacrificed on the cross made atonement for our lives of sin. For many this is a mystery, but there is power in the blood of Jesus. We’ll talk about that perhaps another time.

What happened to Peter with his disciples and Cornelius and his household changed the path of the early church from its narrow focus on Jews to a wider focus on all mankind. Without this revelation, none of us, unless some of us were Jewish, would have known about Jesus. It was an important moment and so Luke gave it two chapters! Let’s pray.