

Even them?

Last week in church, we looked at Revelation 7, and considered the visions that John had about the future: a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and before the Lamb. They were wearing white robes and were holding palm branches in their hands. And they cried out in a loud voice: "Salvation belongs to our God, who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb." All the angels were standing around the throne and around the elders and the four living creatures. They fell down on their faces before the throne and worshiped God... (Rev 7:9-11)

It's way out there. It's hard to understand.

But today, we turn to the book of Acts – Chapter 11, verses 1 to 18 – and in contrast to last week's "out there" reading, this is absolutely grounded. It deals with things that we can understand, and things that we can – that we need to – respond to.

Acts tells the story of the growth of the early church. So far in the book of Acts, Jesus has ascended to heaven, the Holy Spirit has come at Pentecost, Stephen's been martyred, Saul has persecuted the church, then has been converted and as Paul has preached the gospel, and the church has grown throughout it all.

Chapter 10 tells us about a Roman Centurion named Cornelius, who was a believer in God, and the chapter ends with Cornelius and his whole household being baptized, and the apostle Peter staying with them in order to help them grow as followers of Jesus. Cornelius was a Centurion from the Italian Regiment, he wasn't Jewish – he was a Gentile.

He wasn't Jewish! This was initially a great issue for Peter, but Peter had vision that it was okay for him to go to Cornelius, and when he arrived at Cornelius' house, he found a gathering of the centurion's family and friends.

Peter spoke to the gathering, saying: "I now realize how true it is that God does not show favoritism ³⁵ but accepts from every nation the one who fears him and does what is right. ³⁶ You know the message God sent to the people of Israel, announcing the good news of peace through Jesus Christ, who is Lord of all. ³⁷ You know what has happened throughout the province of Judea, beginning in Galilee after the baptism that John preached— ³⁸ how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and power, and how he went around doing good and healing all who were under the power of the devil, because God was with him.

³⁹ "We are witnesses of everything he did in the country of the Jews and in Jerusalem. They killed him by hanging him on a cross, ⁴⁰ but God raised him from the dead on the third day and caused him to be seen. ⁴¹ He was not seen by all the people, but by witnesses whom God had already chosen— by us who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead. ⁴² He commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he is the one whom God appointed as judge of the living and the dead. ⁴³ All the prophets testify about him that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name." (Acts 10:34-43)

And then the Holy Spirit came on all those gathered. It was exciting stuff!

In today's reading, Peter, fresh from ministering to Cornelius and his family, fresh from witnessing the arrival of the Holy Spirit with the gentile believers, has gone from Caesarea to Jerusalem to share the good news about the spread of the word of God to the gentiles himself.

Acts 11:1 tells us this news spread quickly: “The apostles and the believers throughout Judea heard that the Gentiles also had received the word of God.”

The Gentiles also had received the word of God! This was good news – something to be celebrated! Except we find that it wasn't.

When he arrived, the circumcised believers were unimpressed.

Look at verses 2-3: “So when Peter went up to Jerusalem, the circumcised believers criticized him and said, “You went into the house of uncircumcised men and ate with them.””

The circumcised believers were Christians from a Jewish background and they still held to the Law of Moses. It seems that they didn't mind outsiders coming in – but only if they also became Jews, and were circumcised, and followed the Jewish laws and honoured the various Jewish festivals.

A few chapters on, at the Council of Jerusalem, other Jewish believers in Jesus make their position absolutely clear: “Certain people came down from Judea to Antioch and were teaching the believers: “Unless you are circumcised, according to the custom taught by Moses, you cannot be saved...Then some of the believers who belonged to the party of the Pharisees stood up and said, “The Gentiles must be circumcised and required to keep the law of Moses.” (Acts 15:1,5)

It clearly took a while for Peter's message to 'sink in' to his fellow Jewish believers. This was a really deep-seated view amongst, it seems, many (if not most of) the Jews who had become Christians: after all, they'd been taught all their lives they were God's chosen people; they were special in the eyes of God, and other people – gentiles – were unclean. And of course, these gentiles were outsiders to the nation of Israel – including Romans who had occupied and exploited their land.

When Peter arrived with the good news of gentile converts, they were unimpressed on two counts - Firstly, he went into the home of a gentile and second, secondly he ate with them.

Even though it went against Jewish tradition and practice, for followers of Jesus, eating with gentiles already had pretty good precedents... after all, Jesus and his disciples had done so - in Luke 5:29-30: “Then Levi held a great banquet for Jesus at his house, and a large crowd of tax collectors and others were eating with them. But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law who belonged to their sect complained to his disciples, “Why do you eat and drink with tax collectors and sinners?””, and in Luke 15:2 “Now the tax collectors and sinners were all gathering around to hear Jesus. But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law muttered, “This man welcomes sinners and eats with them.””

Luke, the author of the book of Acts, makes it clear that Peter is right – followers of Jesus don't have to follow the Jewish law. We don't have to follow the Jewish dietary laws, we don't have to be circumcised.

It was being made clear that the church wasn't just going to be a subset of Jewish believers – in fact it was the opposite: It was the fulfillment of what God had promised, bringing Jews and gentiles together. And bringing them together as equals. Equal beneficiaries of God's grace through Jesus, equals as members of his church, and equals as bearers of the gospel to the world. Jew and gentile alike.

Remember last week's reading from Revelation chapter 7 – “After this I looked, and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and before the Lamb.”

That's God's plan. But if you'd been living your life thinking you, because of your heritage and your adherence to special laws, were special, to the exclusion of people from other nations, tribes, peoples and languages, it would be absolutely shocking news. What would you do?

It would be tempting, of course, to think of it as a loss of privilege for the Jewish people. But it's better viewed as elevation of the gentiles. The Jews didn't lose anything... but the gentiles did gain.

That can be a hard thing to deal with though. If someone else gets a gift, there's always a tendency for us to question the giver.... Why him or her? Why not someone else?

I think of Jesus' parable of the workers in the Vineyard from Matthew 20, where the owner of the vineyard gives the same wage to workers who only worked for a couple of hours in the late afternoon to those who toiled away all day. On the surface, it doesn't seem fair... but no one got any less than promised.

We shouldn't question the generosity of others... and nor should we question the generosity of God.

Peter was, of course, Jewish. And it took some effort for him to get the message. But he did, and he took it to heart. And he stood up to the criticism of what he'd done by the Jewish believers – “You went into the house of uncircumcised men and ate with them.”

Effectively, “You went and ate with people who are unclean. People who aren't like us. You ate with them.”

Peter could have responded from a position of authority... “Don't you know who I am? I was with Jesus. I saw him transfigured. I walked on water. Jesus told me he would build his church on me. Jesus told me to tend his sheep. Now God's given me this vision, and you'd better listen to me.”

But verse 4 tells us that Peter didn't do that – instead, “Starting from the beginning, Peter told them the whole story: “I was in the city of Joppa praying, and in a trance I saw a vision...” He told the whole story. His response isn't to appeal to his own authority, but instead to share how God had explained it to him.

Peter describes in detail what Luke records in chapter 10 how Peter had come to this understanding that gentiles didn't have to adopt Jewish law and tradition. But at the time, Peter had thought it outrageous: “Surely not, Lord!” Peter replied. “I have never eaten anything impure or unclean.”

Peter admits that he was wrong, initially, and how his mind had been changed.

And then Peter ties that change – that generosity of God – to how God was working in the hearts of others – from verse 11, “Right then three men who had been sent to me from Caesarea stopped at the house where I was staying. 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. He told us how he had seen an angel appear in his house and say, ‘Send to Joppa for Simon who is called Peter. He will bring you a message through which you and all your household will be saved.’ (11:11-13)

After all this background, in verse 17, Peter asks his critics a simple question: “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?”

They have to make a response to that – if God has given even them the same gift that he is given us. Who was Peter to stand in God's way?

Since God has gifted the Gentiles with salvation, how could Peter stand in the way of God doing his work? How could anyone? That would be absurd. After all, in the end, we're all either doing what God wants us to do... or we're doing something else. It's that simple. What were the Jewish believers going to say in response?

One of the commentaries I read put it like this: Essentially, Peter is saying, "If you have a problem with this, take it up with God.[, not me]".

And sure enough, verse 18 tells us that 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."

Even to the gentiles. Thousands of years of the people of Israel regarding themselves as special came crashing down.

Even to the gentiles. Even to those who had not known God for all that time. Even to those who had opposed the people of Israel. Even to those who had occupied their country.

Even them.

The early church's vision was narrow and traditional. (Of course, many people would say the contemporary church is narrow and traditional, too. But while that may be true in some ways, I don't think it's really comparable). We need to remember that most - if not all - the believers at Jerusalem were Jews, and when they became followers of Jesus, they didn't forsake their Jewish religion. They saw Christianity as a fulfilment of Judaism. Just like Rebekah from Jews for Jesus who shared with us in March. And that's okay.

The problem for many of those early Jewish believers was that in their minds, Jesus had only added new teachings to their existing law and religion. So they held that if a person wanted to accept Christ, he had to become a Jew first. They wanted people to follow Jesus, but also to do some other things as well.

I think that many churches and church goers can learn some lessons from this.

Just like Jews for Jesus hold on to Jewish traditions and practices, and accept Jesus, we can hold on to our traditions, even if not all Christians follow those same traditions. But we do need to make sure that those things don't get in the way of our following Jesus, or perhaps don't become some sort of precondition for being accepted as a follower of Jesus too.

Just like those early Jewish believers ended up praising God and, saying, "So then, even to Gentiles God has granted repentance that leads to life," we need to praise God that God has, through Jesus' death and resurrection, opened up the way to eternal life for all who turn to him in faith.

We need to be on guard that our own traditions and rules don't blind us to God's purpose to reach out to all people in salvation. Everyone is to be reached no matter who they are. And sometimes, we might have to go against our traditions or do things differently, in order to reach those people.

And we need to remember that people worship and serve God differently than we do.

But Luke tells us that the Jewish believers praised God, saying, "So then, even to Gentiles God has granted repentance that leads to life."

God has granted repentance... and that repentance leads to life. People need to respond to God, to accept Jesus as Lord, or turn to him faith, or whatever your preferred term may be. But however you phrase it, there is a need to repent: to stop doing what is wrong, and do what it right.

All of us who choose to follow Jesus.

Jew or gentile.

People of all nations, tribes, peoples and languages.

People who have loved Jesus all their lives.

Even people who have only now opened their hearts to hum.

Even us.

Even them.

Amen.