

St. Thomas Ipswich - Easter 5, 19 May 2019
The Revd Jutta Brueck

Readings:

Acts 11.1-18

Peter's Report to the Church at Jerusalem

Now the apostles and the believers who were in Judea heard that the Gentiles had also accepted the word of God. So when Peter went up to Jerusalem, the circumcised believers criticized him, saying, 'Why did you go to uncircumcised men and eat with them?' Then Peter began to explain it to them, step by step, saying, 'I was in the city of Joppa praying, and in a trance I saw a vision. There was something like a large sheet coming down from heaven, being lowered by its four corners; and it came close to me. As I looked at it closely I saw four-footed animals, beasts of prey, reptiles, and birds of the air. I also heard a voice saying to me, "Get up, Peter; kill and eat." But I replied, "By no means, Lord; for nothing profane or unclean has ever entered my mouth." But a second time the voice answered from heaven, "What God has made clean, you must not call profane." This happened three times; then everything was pulled up again to heaven. At that very moment three men, sent to me from Caesarea, arrived at the house where we were. The Spirit told me to go with them and not to make a distinction between them and us. These six brothers also accompanied me, and we entered the man's house. He told us how he had seen the angel standing in his house and saying, "Send to Joppa and bring Simon, who is called Peter; he will give you a message by which you and your entire household will be saved." And as I began to speak, the Holy Spirit fell upon them just as it had upon us at the beginning. And I remembered the word of the Lord, how he had said, "John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit." If then God gave them the same gift that he gave us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could hinder God?' When they heard this, they were silenced. And they praised God, saying, 'Then God has given even to the Gentiles the repentance that leads to life.'

John 13.31-35 *"I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."*

Sermon

We have heard this commandment many, many times; and yet it is so difficult to put into practice: on a personal level; within the church; within and between nations who were built on Christian foundations.

Just looking at the history of Europe, which since the middle ages has been 'Christian' – it is a history full of conflict and wars, many of them religious wars, fought under the pretext of seeking to promote the 'true' understanding of the faith.

If we listen to the news or read the papers at the moment, so much of it is about divisions – within countries, between countries; talk of barriers and borders and walls being put up, to protect and pursue the interests of particular groups or nations.

And so much of the discussion is ill-informed and heated; we have not seen the British parliament as paralyzed as it is over the question of Brexit – paralyzed by strongly held beliefs and positions, a lack of humility and a willingness to listen; a lack of will to make concessions and find a way forward.

Why is that? What is at work here? At the heart are questions of identity!

Our first reading this morning, from the Acts of the apostles, describes a situation in the early church which is about 'identity'; a situation, which has the potential of hostility, exploding conflict, and division.

Peter is the main character: he has come back from Joppa to face the Church in Jerusalem, who are appalled at what he has done: He baptized the gentile household of Cornelius – that's could be forgiven - but he, a life-long Jew, who observed all the Jewish purity laws, stayed at Cornelius' house for several days and ate with them; he made himself unclean – a shocking; unheard of thing to do. The story goes to the heart of Jewish identity – and their relationship with God.

In order to understand our first reading we have to go back to the previous chapter, ch. 10 in the acts of the apostles, where we are told the story of Cornelius, a Roman centurion, a god fearing and devout man; well respected by the Jewish community. Cornelius had a vision where he was told to send for Peter and Peter, too, had the vision we hear about in the reading this morning: to go to the gentiles and not to be afraid to eat with them.

And so what happened when Peter got to Cornelius' house, and he was teaching them about the lord Jesus Christ, the Holy spirit came down on the whole household, just as the Spirit had done on the first day of Pentecost. Peter himself was in awe of what had happened, realising that God was working in a big way, showing that Jesus had died for the Gentiles, too. God had given him the vision about eating with Gentiles, so he knew it was okay to stay with Cornelius for several days, to live and eat with them.

Peter and his companions had the courage to overcome the barrier of being Jewish, circumcised; keeping yourself clean and eating with Gentiles. Peter had to let go of something that was very deep in him. It is no wonder that when he gets back to Jerusalem the church there are appalled. They say to him '*why did you go to uncircumcised men and eat with them?*' Peter explains to them 'step-by-step' what happened; and this little word 'step-by-step' is not just about explaining it one thing after another, **but it is Peter telling the story to make the truth clear that God was in charge here, that God was pushing things forward.**

I wonder if Peter, through the many mistakes he had made, really learnt to pay attention to the actions of God's spirit; he learnt to be willing to be challenged; to discern what God wants; he was willing to listen to Cornelius and his story; he remembered what Jesus had said regarding the Spirit and the church's mission, Peter had his mind expanded in a way that he never expected – he needed courage to stand up for what he saw God doing. The same may be true for us. There will be times when we have to stand out from the rest of the people around us.

For the Christian church, to learn what it means to let go of cherished ideas and convictions that make us feel safe and comfortable has been a challenge right from the start. For example, it took the church centuries to realise **that slavery** was not compatible with Jesus' teachings, that every human being is a beloved child of God, irrespective of race, gender or ability; other examples are the struggle for women's ordination and the place of LGBT+ people in our churches.

This morning's story from the Acts of the apostles, about overcoming deeply held religious and cultural boundaries invites us all to examine areas in our lives where we find it hard to engage in real dialogue and conversation; where we do not want to listen to the others or expand our horizons to see a bigger and different picture. – where we struggle to love one another and to give glory to God.

I can't but help think about the European elections this week.

As a German, my starting place thinking about the European elections comes with the knowledge that the beginnings of the European Union go back to the end of WW2 when the allied forces were trying to find a settlement that would lead to peace and stability in Europe: I come with the awareness that we have enjoyed 70 years of peace, 50 years of freedom of movement between the UK and Europe, and the European Union has played an important part in this.

For me, Europe and European elections are about building a world that seeks to implement the values that were strong after the disaster of WW2: seeking peace; developing appropriate interdependence that will lead to friendships and stability.

Seventy years on, it seems in all European countries the voices calling for a strengthening of national interest; of hostility towards those who are from other cultures and religions; the voices calling for pulling up the draw bridge rather than looking at the wider world and realising that only co-operation between countries will build lasting peace & prosperity. The debate, as we find it in the papers and the news is all about 'what is in it for the UK?' Do any of us know what the British

MEP's want to contribute to the peace and stability of Europe and the world? Do we ask the question in a world where more and more barriers are going up?

Whatever our political colour or beliefs, in the current climate and debate, what does it mean for us Christians to love others and to glorify God?

I am struck that **the first things the Holy Spirit does** when s(he) comes into the world is to break down barriers and connect people. At Pentecost – the fact that the disciples can speak and understand all languages. God breaks down the barriers between people and connects them. In our story today, the Holy Spirit coming down on the household of the Roman Centurion, Cornelius- again, the Spirit breaks down barriers between Jews and Gentiles.

This morning, we may just want to think: where does my identity come from? The fact that I am Suffolk, or white, or English, or British, or European, the fact that I am a Christian and follow Jesus; that I am a labourer in God's kingdom.

The Holy Spirit reaches into all aspects of our lives and the world.

For us Christians the invitation is to love in such a way that we break down barriers and are seen to be disciples of Jesus. Amen.