

“For All” – Acts 10:34-48

Can you imagine how uneasy those disciples with Peter must have been? “This is crazy! How are we ever going to explain this when we get back to Jerusalem?! It has been a strange enough journey down here to Joppa and Caesarea, but this latest happening with these Gentiles is surely the strangest thing we’ve encountered. And Peter, far from putting his foot down as we’d expect, well, he’s been right there promoting the whole thing, even going so far as baptizing these outsiders. What is the church coming to?”

What indeed, was the church coming to?! Just when things seemed to be settling down, just when the church throughout Judea, Galilee, and Samaria had peace and was being built up, just when things were going so well, living in fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit (Lk 9.31), things all of a sudden seemed to be unraveling. Just when they thought they knew what they were doing, and more importantly what God wanted them to be doing, all of a sudden the game plan seemed to be shifting around them.

Take for example this crazy episode with Peter – how to understand this, let alone explain it to that gang of uptight uprights back in Jerusalem! Peter had been doing well enough, traveling down to Lydda and then Joppa. There was that triumph for the Lord in Joppa, with the raising of Tabitha, or Dorcas as the Greeks called her. What a day that was, and oh how the people there had rejoiced! No wonder Peter stayed with them for a while. It was great of that Simon to look after him so well while he was there.

But this?! How could this disaster have happened? You’d think Peter wouldn’t even have accepted the invitation to go down to that Cornelius’ house, never mind to actually meet with those Gentiles. And then to actually eat with them, even to stay in his house for a few days, all of that is bad enough, but that he actually baptized those Gentiles – what is the church coming to? This is going to stir the pot back in Jerusalem, for sure!

Stir the pot it did. The controversy over whether non-Jews could be legitimate Christians bubbled and boiled for years. And the great sadness is that the same disgusting division still erupts today, almost two thousand years later. The controversy over whether or not to include Gentiles still rages in the church today, although the definition of who’s unacceptable has changed over the ages. Back in the early days of the church, in the days when Peter, James, John, Stephen, Paul and the others spread the word throughout Jerusalem, Judea and Samaria, the Gentiles rejected from inclusion were non-Jews, those people not part of the children of God by birth. Those who sat in Jerusalem and who had appointed themselves keepers of the purity of the new church resisted any attempts to let anyone but the pure be baptized, be fully accepted into the church.

Sadly, there are still self-appointed “keepers of the purity” in the church today, sitting in righteous isolation, surrounded by a phalanx of smiling faces protecting them from the impure, from those who they feel would sully and defile the church. The early church struggled with the issues of who was and who was not eligible to be accepted into the church, and the church today still struggles with similar issues, only now it’s not Gentile versus Jew but issues of gender and lifestyle. Whatever the reasons, the reality is still all too often a turning away of people seeking to find reconciliation with God.

I can’t for the life of me figure out why people who tell others that they wouldn’t be welcome in their church would believe for a moment that those seekers would want to have anything to do with their exclusive little Jesus club! What I look for in a church is a place where the gospel is preached, the good news of Jesus Christ who died and rose again to bring forgiveness of sins to anyone who believes in him – the same gospel preached by Peter to that assembled crowd in Caesarea.

There are those who would try to rob the gospel of its power, by claiming that that’s not what Peter meant, but it’s pretty clear from scripture that that is both what Peter said and what he meant – forgiveness of sins through the name of Jesus Christ for anyone who would believe in him.

It’s not as though Peter invented this claim, or worked it out through a series of study groups, council meetings, task forces or General Assemblies. Of all people, Peter was perhaps the least likely to

spontaneously begin to reach out to the unclean, the unacceptable. But then, it wasn't spontaneous, and it wasn't Peter's own doing, it was the word and work of God, active in him. You might recall that, fresh from healing Dorcas (Tabitha) after she had died and had been prepared for burial, Peter was staying in Joppa with Simon the tanner, when God made it clear to him that the rules of the game had changed not just dramatically but totally. Beginning with a vision of a sheet being lowered from heaven filled with all kinds of creatures considered unfit to eat, God instructed Peter to eat. Good old Peter, always one to lead with his mouth, reacted predictably enough by arguing with God: "No way, Lord!". God, having not only the first but the last word, replied, "Yes, way!" three times, and Peter was greatly puzzled. The voice emphasized to Peter that what God has made clean, he must not call profane.

Then Cornelius, responding to a vision from God, sent men to fetch Peter, and as he arrived at Cornelius' house, Peter realized what it was all about, and understood clearly that the world had just opened up, and that the word of God, the gospel of Jesus Christ was for all who would hear and believe, Gentile as well as Jew. Filled and inspired with this new and radical understanding, Peter began to preach to them, outlining the story of Jesus anointed by God with the Holy Spirit, teaching and healing throughout Galilee, Judea and Jerusalem; Jesus executed on a cross, and then raised by God on the third day, appearing to and eating and drinking with his followers. Peter affirmed that the risen Christ had commanded his disciples to preach to the people, and to testify that Jesus is indeed the one sent by God with ultimate power to judge both the living and the dead, and that in accordance with scripture everyone who believes in Jesus receives forgiveness of sins through his name.

Before Peter had even finished his proclamation of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Holy Spirit fell upon all who heard the word. Upon Gentiles! Upon those who had no claim whatsoever to being part of the Jewish children of God. Not because they suddenly decided to become Jewish, not because they had demonstrated such a fervent response to the word that Peter preached, not because of the magnificence of Peter's preaching, not because they had covered themselves in sackcloth and ashes, beat themselves up, promised to change, not because they had agreed to 'overcome' their Gentile-ness, not that such a thing would even be possible, not because of any of these reasons but simply because God so willed, those who listened, who heard the word of God proceeding from Peter's lips, received the gift of the Holy Spirit.

The untouchable were now touched by God himself, the unclean had been declared no longer profane, the fence surrounding the grace of God had been blown away by God himself. Race, gender, colour, background, status, history, foibles, weaknesses and most of all sins were no longer a barrier to receiving the gift of the Holy Spirit, the gift of forgiveness in Christ's name simply through believing in him. The Holy Spirit fell upon all who heard the word.

Not everyone was happy, however. There were good Christians witnessing this event who couldn't believe their eyes, who were astounded that these undeserving Gentiles were receiving the Holy Spirit simply for believing in Jesus Christ. What a radical experience, and yet they could not deny that these new if unacceptable Christians had truly been baptized in the Spirit. They must have protested, for Peter challenged them, demanding whether anyone had the right to withhold the water of baptism since God had so clearly included them. It appears that there was still some reluctance because Peter eventually had to order that the new Christians be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ.

The message of this episode is quite clear – the water of baptism cannot be withheld from those who have, in their belief in Jesus, received the gift of the Holy Spirit. Neither can the loaf or the cup be withheld from those who live secure in the forgiveness of sins given through the death and resurrection of Christ Jesus, for indeed it is Christ who has been ordained as the judge of the living and the dead. It is abundantly clear that forgiveness of sins is not just for those who we think worthy, but indeed is for all who believe in his name. All thanks and praise be to God for the gift of His Son Jesus Christ our Lord, and for the Holy Spirit.