

“Divine Moment” – Acts 10:34-43 – Jan 13, 2008

I often like to begin my sermons with an example of human foolishness that is relevant to the text we are hearing. I have heard a couple of you plead, “please – no more examples from our good neighbours to the south” but that gives me some difficulties. I would try to use Canadian current events – for example the latest ludicrous maneuverings by Prime Minister Harper around the Brian Mulroney / Karlheinz Schreiber circus – but in classic Canadian fashion that kind of foolishness doesn’t critically affect much of Canada, let alone the world. Another area that comes to mind as an example of human foolishness is the church – not so much at a congregational level as at the exalted levels of church government – but again the impact is often localized. For example, did anyone notice that a bill was quietly introduced in the British Parliament the other day that would declare the Church of England is no longer the state religion of England? As Presbyterians we will likely just shrug at something happening within the Church of England. Besides, I would like to go on record as having nothing but the highest regard for my colleagues in the courts of the church.

And so, my apologies to those of you whose blood pressure is raised at the very mention of Bush’s name – but late last night (our time) a vote was taken in the Iraq Parliament, the result of which is that former Bathist Party members can once again work as civil servants. President Bush, who is in the region trying to locate a legacy, declared it a good move, a sign of progress. Needless to say, he didn’t mention that the vote was a reversal of the “de-Bathification” policy he implemented years earlier with urging from his gang of mis-advisors.

It is a good thing, but results are expected to be mixed, not the least because the Bathists are primarily Sunni, and the government is almost exclusively Shiite. One does not have to speculate to understand that the Sunni Bathists are more than a bit suspicious about how they will be treated at work should they manage to get their jobs back.

This example comes to mind as I’m writing this sermon because it relates so completely to our reading from Acts. The process of “othering” – focusing on the differences of others from ourselves – is not restricted to Sunni’s and Shiia’s but seems to be a pervasive human characteristic. And when we group others by appearance, by background, by culture, by race, by religion or faith that process of “othering” all too often slides into evil, fostering oppression, abuse, and injustice.

We can see in that reading from Acts that the church was wrestling with those same issues of exclusion and inclusion. The section we read is a portion of a sermon Peter preached to a group of people. This portion of that sermon gives not only a very concise summary of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus but also gives a cogent conclusion of the importance of Jesus. Peter claims that “all the prophets testify about him that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name.”

Heard by itself, this short message doesn’t have the same impact that it does when you hear it in the context in which it is set. In order to hear the full shocking impact of Peter’s message it helps to hear what brackets this piece – what comes before and what comes after. Our passage begins with “then Peter began to speak to them.” The ‘them’ referred to is a large gathering of people, specifically the relatives and friends of Cornelius. But again, to feel the full impact of Peter’s statement we need to recall who Cornelius is, and who his relatives and friends are as well.

Backing up a little bit in the text, we discover Cornelius – a Gentile, a devout Roman, a member of the Italian Guard in Caesarea. Now normally devout Romans would pray to a collection of gods, and they would have a little family shrine at which they would do their praying, but we are told that Cornelius was constantly praying to God – that’s “capital-G” God as we know God. Notwithstanding that Cornelius was not Jewish, an angel appeared to Cornelius around 3:00 in the

afternoon we are told and in a divine moment instructed him to send men to Joppa to fetch a man named Simon (Peter).

Around noon the next day, Peter was indeed in Joppa, and we are told he went up onto the roof to pray (closer to God? away from distractions? seeking some peace and quiet?) While he was there he got hungry and sent downstairs for some take-out (kosher, of course!) and fell into a trance while waiting. In his trance he saw something like a sheet descending from heaven, full of all kinds of animals – definitely un-kosher. Also in a divine moment a voice instructed him to “get up, Peter, kill & eat”. “No way!”, protested Peter, “I’ve never eaten anything unclean!” The Voice replied, “Way! What God has made clean, you must not call profane!”, and in case Peter thought it was a bad connection, repeated the same message twice more.

These two incidents – the angels talking to Cornelius and the Voice talking to Peter come together with the arrival of the men from Joppa – you can imagine Peter’s vision being broken by the doorbell – they tell him why they are there, he returns to Caesarea with them, and Peter and Cornelius tell each other about their respective visions. They – and we as well – cannot escape the conclusion that God has moved to bring these two together at this moment, and in preparation for this has opened Peter to a brand new understanding of just how significant Christ is not just for Jewish people, but for all who believe.

And so Peter began to speak to them – Cornelius and his relatives and friends, this collection of Gentiles in a Gentile’s house. Peter senses that these Gentiles needed to hear the whole story, and so he gives it to them – the entire gospel, the complete story of God’s action in Jesus beginning with his receiving the Holy Spirit during his baptism by John, continuing through his preaching peace and doing good and healing, including his death by hanging on a tree, being raised by God on the third day and appearing to his witnesses with whom he ate and drank and whom he also commanded to testify he is the one ordained by God. Peter concluded with a reminder that all the prophets testify about Jesus that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name. Whew! That’s a lot to handle in one sermon, let alone in a summary! The entire Christian story – the complete concentrated message of salvation, that everyone who believes in Jesus receives forgiveness of sins.

Did those Gentiles hear the message that they were no longer excluded, but were totally included by God? Apparently so, because if we read on we discover that while Peter was still speaking the Holy Spirit fell upon all who heard the word. In a Pentecost-like event echoing the gospel account, the assembled listeners, who now become the talkers, speak excitedly in various tongues, and all were praising God. In this divine moment Peter realizes that the waters of baptism cannot be withheld from these believers, even though they are not Jews, and all who believe and respond are baptized. Mind you, Peter soon gets himself into all kinds of trouble back in Jerusalem when he reports his actions to corporate headquarters, but that’s a story for another day – suffice it to say that Peter, and Paul, win out – and so do we!

This is a divine moment, in more ways than one. For most of us, the word ‘moment’ refers to an instant in time, a brief identifiable point in chronology. However, for engineers (and pilots) the word ‘moment’ refers to “a turning force”. Before flying pilots calculate not only the total weight of the plane and contents, but also the location of the center of all that weight as it’s crucial that that centre of gravity point be within defined limits. In this episode with Peter and Cornelius God provides a huge turning force – and point! – in the history of the Christian faith, and in the history of the world. This is the break-through moment when it becomes clear that what God has done in Christ is not merely for a single people, neither is it only for those who meet some hugely difficult criteria of faith or who can cross some high threshold of righteousness, but that simply, everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name.

Note how sure and certain that declaration is – it is NOT “everyone who believes *can* receive, *might* receive, goes on a list to be considered to receive, is entered in a heavenly lottery to win to receive, ...” This is not the equivalent of that credit card spam, “you are already approved ... to apply” – this is a clear statement that “everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name”.

Now throughout the ages there have always been plenty of people who would like to stuff conditions in there – initially it was the condition that you had to be Jewish before you could believe and receive, often it’s been the ‘right’ race or skin colour that was touted as the necessary condition to receive God’s grace. Even today there are plenty of people who would still like to stuff conditions into that clear unconditional declaration – conditions like “you have to believe hard enough”, or “you have to believe in a particular way”, or “we’ll act as your agent and apply for the forgiveness for you”, or “we’re the central distribution center for God’s forgiveness, and we’ll let you know when you can have some”. How sad, especially when the real declaration is so clear, so simple, so available – “everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins in his name”. “All who believe” ... not some, not a few, not just the ones we like, or think appropriate, or worthy, or whatever. “All who believe, ...” A very frightening thought to some, an incredibly life-giving thought to others.

We need to recast this divine moment of revelation into our own time. It’s easy enough to say along with Peter, “yes, we understand God’s grace is for the Gentiles also” but who are today’s Gentiles? Perhaps we can likewise be turned by God’s divine moment to identify those people who most need to hear clearly the message of God’s mercy and grace and inclusion, and to join Peter in proclaiming to them this foundational message of the gospel, “everyone who believes in Jesus receives forgiveness of sins in his name”.