

“Not To Make A Distinction” – Acts 11:1-18 – Easter 5 – Apr 24, 2016

Last week we delved in some depth into the episode in which Peter brought the woman named Tabitha (or Dorcas if you prefer the Greek version of her name) back to life. I hope you can remember how that story ended ... Peter was staying “for some time” at the house of one Simon, the tanner, in a town called Joppa. He had been called from Joppa to go to Lydda to deal with the death of Tabitha and also while in Joppa Peter was invited to go to Caesarea to meet a man named Cornelius. You will probably also recall from today’s reading that Peter had a vision of a large sheet filled with all kinds of animals being lowered from heaven and a voice telling him to eat. Peter argues with the voice – nothing new there – but the voice wins the argument, telling Peter that what God has made clean he must not call profane. And to make sure Peter gets the point, this happens three times. The text doesn’t tell us whether Peter argued with the voice all three times, but it seems likely that he did! Just at that moment, some men arrived and asked Peter to come with them. The Spirit urged Peter to do so, and this time he actually listened and went to the man’s house.

At this point I should note that today’s reading is a short form of the fuller episode – the whole of Chapter 10 – that we have skipped over since hearing that Peter stayed at Simon the Tanner’s house. Today’s reading is a condensed version of those events, but takes place in Jerusalem. One of those little details that I find fascinating is that nowhere in the short version is the man named – in the full version in Chapter 10 he is not only named as Cornelius but is also several times identified as a very devout man – albeit a Gentile – who worships God. However here in the shorter version the man is unnamed and there’s only a brief reference to him responding to an angelic message to send for Peter.

In any event, Peter is asked to speak to the crowd gathered with Cornelius, and speak he does. In the full version he gives them the whole story, but in the condensed version the Spirit falls upon the listeners just as Peter begins to speak. Peter clues in, realizing that if God can give these Gentiles the gift of the Holy Spirit, how could he – Peter – deny them being baptized, and so he baptized them.

Both versions bring to us a joyful story; a profound story even. But why is there a shorter version that immediately follows the longer version? One theory would be that the short version was the one that was well known and Luke dug to find the full details behind it and included them as a prologue. That might explain why there’s a long version, but why then the shorter version?

I believe the answer to that question lies in what brackets the shorter version of Peter’s experience with Cornelius. The three verses at the beginning and the one verse at the end not only provide a wrapper for the shorter version of the story of Cornelius’ conversion but also signal that this shorter version *is not even really about Cornelius’ conversion*. This text is not merely a replay of that momentous event in Caesarea but is a subsequent and perhaps even more momentous event that took place in Jerusalem. I emphasise this because when we hear this text we tend to hear the story of the conversion of the Gentiles – but that’s the focus of the longer version. Here, instead, we have an episode of the conversion of the church.

I think this mishearing happens because of the way the material is presented. We tend to take the beginning and ending verses as setting the stage and providing a concluding wrap-up and focus instead on the meat in the middle of the sandwich. But here, the lead-in verses and the concluding verse *are* the real story – the middle part is important, but it’s not the main topic.

And what was that important lead-in? “Now the apostles and the believers who were in Judea heard that the Gentiles had also accepted the word of God. So by the time Peter went up to Jerusalem, the [true-blue Jewish] believers were already upset. When he arrived they criticized him, saying “Why did you go to foreigners and eat with them?” Criticized him. Accused him would be a more accurate description of their challenge. They probably even created a commission to look into his wrongdoing. The official church was pulling itself together to deal with this rampant heresy!

But hold on a moment – let’s put that in context. Recall that Peter stayed with Simon the tanner for some time and surprisingly that seems to have been ok with the uptight upright Christians in Jerusalem. We can only speculate why that was ok – could it have been because Simon would also have been a very wealthy man handsomely supporting the local synagogue? But to enter the home of a non-Jew? To actually eat with those ungodly people? Unbelievable! Intolerable! What was he thinking? He must give an accounting for this astounding behaviour.

And Peter does give an accounting – the short version of the events that happened while he was on the road in Joppa. I love the way Luke presents the beginning of that account: “Then Peter began to explain it to them, step by step, saying ...” ‘Step by step’ ... what a juicy little detail that is! Luke could have simply said “he began to explain it to them, saying ...” but instead chose to add that zinger. Why do I call it a zinger? Because “step by step” is how you patiently explain something to someone who is possibly or probably not capable of following a complex argument. “Step by step” is how you have to explain something – or have something explained to you – when the explainer thinks you cannot grasp the meaning of what’s being explained. That little phrase “step by step” here in this bible text tells me a lot about what either the author, or for that matter Peter, thought about the religiously righteous – or was it righteously religious? – in Jerusalem who seemed to be missing the point of what had happened in Caesarea.

Whatever he might have thought about their criticism or about how they might or might not be able to grasp the stunning importance of what had happened, Peter laid it out step by step for his critics. Many of the details are missing in the short version, perhaps because Peter realized the ‘where’ wasn’t so important and the names weren’t so important. He realized that what was important was that God clearly affirmed the Gentile believers through the gift of the Holy Spirit. Moreover, there is one detail in there that provides the focus for the whole story of the conversion of the church ... “The Spirit told me to go with them and not to make a distinction between them and us.” That is the essence and the really important part of what happened, that the Spirit directed Peter – and thus those in Jerusalem, and those in the faith – not to make a distinction, but to accept them for their faith the same way that God accepts people with faith. It is well that Peter’s churchy critics, bless them, also came to realize that the affirmation of the believers and their acceptance by God was truly the important thing, for their hearts were opened – “they praised God, saying, ‘Then God has given even to the Gentiles the repentance that leads to life’.”

Isn’t it a good thing that we don’t have any critics in the church today who are ready to challenge people with “why do you go to the ungodly and eat with them?” Of course I’m saying that with more than a tinge of sarcasm! Sadly, there are still those who believe that the first and most important role of the church is to preserve social standards and even ethnicity. There are still all too many who believe that the church is for a select few and that those “other” people are not welcome, whoever those “other” people may be.

Thanks be to God that it is God who decides who are welcome and affirms that welcome through the Holy Spirit. If it was left up to people, there would be precious few of us in the

church. If it had been left up to the uptight upright in Jerusalem that day, even we wouldn't be in the church! But by the grace of God it is God who decided that we are welcome and we praise him through Christ our Lord.

So now how can we, who have been welcomed into reconciliation with God through the Holy Spirit and our baptism, both welcome others and more importantly convince those who would be exclusionary critics of God's grace? To welcome others we need, like Peter, to come to understand God's declaration of acceptance and to live out that acceptance as Peter did, going into the neighbourhood and homes of those considered by others to be outside the bounds of grace and eating with them. That's the easy and fun part. It seems the more difficult task will be to convince the critics that God's grace is not for them alone. How can we get through to those who feel bound and determined to preserve the church exactly the way it is ... or more often, the way it was a long time ago?

There are some clues here from Peter's presentation as to how to do this, I think. One is not to get into a rational argument about the rightness of it all. Peter left out the details of Cornelius' name, his devoutness, his social status. He even left out the detail of the size of the crowd that had gathered to hear him. Peter even left out the details of what he had told them. Instead what he focused upon in his response to the critics was what God had done – how the Holy Spirit had fallen upon and been gifted to those who heard. Peter emphasised what he understood that to mean – and left the rest of the conversion of the critics to God.

And it worked – their hearts were opened and they praised God. The Gentiles were recognized as legitimate members of Christ's church and we Gentiles celebrate that acceptance and reconciliation even today. Thanks be to God that we are accepted by him and may he open our hearts to welcome all those he accepts and welcomes into his presence.