

GOSPEL SEEDS

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Biblical reflections to encourage us in the work of evangelisation

FAITH, THE UNEXPECTED, & CHANGING PERSPECTIVES

Peter explained, 'I had scarcely begun to speak when the Holy Spirit came down on them in the same way as it came down on us in the beginning, and I remembered that the Lord had said, "John baptised with water but you will be baptised with the Holy Spirit." I realised then that God was giving them the identical gift he gave to us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ; and who was I to stand in God's way?' This account satisfied them [the church in Jerusalem] and they gave glory to God, saying 'God has clearly granted the gentiles too the repentance that leads to life.' (Acts 11:15-18)

It clearly surprised Peter that Gentiles could make the same act of repentance as Jews and thus receive the same life of Divine grace, accepting Jesus as Risen Lord, and being baptised with the Holy Spirit, clearly using His gifts. Here I want to reflect on the process of conversion and faith formation and the qualities that accompanied this, particularly in Peter. (For the full account, see Acts 10 – 11.)

The Conversion of Cornelius – and of Peter

Luke's account is worth reflecting on in some detail. In fact, God goes ahead and prepares both Cornelius and Peter. He appears to both of them in unusual ways. They both see something and hear a voice. The outcome is dependent on both of them recognising the 'message' being from God and responding in obedience. Each is challenged and we should not take the outcome as inevitable. What if Cornelius had not sent his servants? What if Peter had dismissed the vision as his own imagination, or his hungry stomach being suggestive, or being of the Devil?

In the event they both say "Yes" and both undergo a change in perspective – a conversion - regarding both Jesus and Judaism. First let us look at Jesus. Cornelius comes to believe that Jesus went about curing people in the power of the Holy Spirit; that he was crucified; he was then raised up by God as judge of all. Forgiveness is offered in his name and Cornelius receives this. Peter comes to believe in a much bigger scope of Christ's work, realising that this forgiveness is available not just to Jews who turn to Jesus, but to anyone. He and the others now have to preach to a wider audience.

Regarding Judaism, they move in what look like opposite directions, with Cornelius moving more into Jewish religion and its practices, while Peter has to put aside some of its practices. Cornelius comes to believe in Jesus as the Christ, sent by God to fulfil his promises given to the Jewish people. He learns that the prophets bear witness to Jesus. Cornelius started off as devout and God fearing and offering practical support to the Jewish community. He is clear that it is this God of the Jews who has spoken to him (10:2). He now moves further into the Jewish sphere and its blessings. By contrast, Peter moves away from Jewish customs (and what would have been seen as Jewish orthodoxy). He has never eaten ritually unclean food. Challenged by the vision, he now goes beyond this and sees that, since all food is acceptable to God, so are all people who fear God. That said, he does also enter the house of a pagan and ends up staying there, receiving his hospitality, and also presumably his food

Following God into new horizons and ways of mission

The focus tends to fall on the fact that Cornelius is converted. However, it is the impact on Peter, and the decisions he takes in the light of this, that are the subject of the ongoing narrative of Acts. The shock waves and consequences of allowing Gentiles to become full members of the church run right through the rest of the New Testament. The early Church, originally completely Jewish, really struggled with this. Even Peter vacillated and weakened at one point (Galatians 2:11-14). But the principle became established that Jesus, and with him Judaism, are to be a blessing to all of humanity, not just the Jews. The church's mission is to all people. This change began with the double conversion of Cornelius and Peter.

So what changed Peter's mind? At one level it was extraordinary events: visions, voices and instructions - & synchronised ones at that. These are narrated as actions of the Holy Spirit. Peter then sees the Holy Spirit come down upon the household in a public way, releasing in them the gift of tongues in a way clearly the same as what originally happened at Pentecost. Peter clearly saw this as a sovereign act of God. Nor, had God waited till Peter had finished his sermon! It was unexpected but it did all fall into a pattern, with the visions and voices received by each man fitting together, and all being fulfilled in a most striking, unplanned and very public way. Importantly, Peter had 6 Jewish Christian witnesses with him. At once this was seen as a work of God. The Holy Spirit was clearly present and acting. Who was Peter to deny it! Rather he wanted to follow where he clearly saw God lead. Baptism in the name of Jesus Christ was thus given to all. The Christians at Jerusalem were also convinced by Peter's account of this set of supernatural events.

Many people dismiss visions, unusual behaviour and 'tongues'. But Peter is willing to take these seriously even when they challenge the cherished practices of his Jewish faith. ('Christianity' was entirely lived out within Judaism up to that point and not seen by Peter as at odds with it.) He knows it is God who makes the difference and he senses God is present and does not find the action of God 'inconvenient' even if it is unconventional. He believes that the mission really belongs to God and his role is to support it as an instrument, blessing what God clearly does. In this way the mission of Jesus took a huge step forward. Do we seek to serve God or do we treat mission as our own? If mission is to move forward in our settings, we will also need the same sort of openness, combined with discernment, and blended with conviction that Peter had.

A Faith that confidently gives and humbly receives

It is tempting to think that the early success of church was due to the absolute certainty of the faith of the Apostles: that they knew their message, how to present it and who the audience was; that they had a package, a formula that just worked. Such a simplification is an error! Yes, they had confidence in God's Revelation in Judaism and as fulfilled by Jesus. They were convinced God acted in Jesus in a decisive and definitive way. But they also knew how much they had struggled to grasp who he was, and how often Jesus had exceeded their expectations and human thinking. Through this, they had also learned humility before God and with it a willingness to be open to a Sovereign God who is also a God of surprises. In fact, God acts consistently in line with his own nature and wisdom; it is just that this is often beyond what we can readily grasp. Mission begins and ends in the mystery of God. Peter is thus open to God and to seeing 'new' ways God acts. He is happy to believe God is acting in a 'Pagan', though Cornelius is clearly God-fearing. Peter is willing to receive as well as to give, to be changed and grow, as well as to call others to conversion. In our age of uncertainty and change, we need confidence in the Gospel. Do we

have this? Are we also open and humble, like Peter, or do we seek to cling to religious patterns that may get in the way of how God may want to undertake mission? A lot may depend on us having all the convictions shown here by Peter

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