

Acts 10:1–35

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 04 February 2018

Preacher: David Helm

[0 : 0 0] There was a man named Cornelius, a centurion of what was known as the Italian cohort, a devout man who feared God with all his household, gave alms generously to the people and prayed continually to God.

About the ninth hour of the day, he saw clearly in a vision an angel of God come in and say to him, Cornelius. And he stared at him in terror and said, What is it, Lord?

And he said to him, Your prayers and your alms have ascended as a memorial before God. And now send men to Joppa and bring one Simon who is called Peter.

He is lodging with one Simon, a tanner, whose house is by the seaside. When the angels who spoke to him had departed, he called two of his servants and a devout soldier from among those who attended him.

And having related everything to them, he sent them to Joppa. The next day, as they were on their journey and approaching the city, Peter went up on the housetop about the sixth hour to pray.

[1 : 0 0] And he became hungry and wanted something to eat. But while they were preparing it, he fell into a trance and saw the heavens opened and something like a great sheet descending, being let down by its four corners upon the earth.

In it were all kinds of animals and reptiles and birds of the air. And there came a voice to him, Rise, Peter, kill and eat. But Peter said, By no means, Lord, for I have never eaten anything that is common or unclean.

And the voice came to him again a second time, What God has made clean, do not call common. This happened three times and the thing was taken up at once to heaven.

Now, while Peter was inwardly perplexed as to what the vision that he had seen might mean, behold, the men who were sent by Cornelius, having made inquiry for Simon's house, stood at the gate and called out to ask whether Simon, who was called Peter, was lodging there.

And while Peter was pondering the vision, the spirit said to him, Behold, three men are looking for you. Rise and go down and accompany them without hesitation, for I have sent them.

[2 : 0 5] And Peter went down to the men and said, I am the one you are looking for. What is the reason for your coming? And they said, Cornelius, a centurion, an upright and God-fearing man, who is well spoken of by the whole Jewish nation, was directed by a holy angel to send for you and to come to his house and to hear what you have to say.

So he invited them in to be his guests. The next day he rose and went away with them, and some of the brothers from Joppa accompanied him. And on the following day they entered Caesarea.

Cornelius was expecting them and had called together his relatives and close friends. When Peter entered, Cornelius met him and fell down at his feet and worshipped him. But Peter lifted him up, saying, Stand up, I too am a man.

And as he talked with him, he went in and found many persons gathered. And he said to them, You yourselves know how unlawful it is for a Jew to associate with or to visit anyone of another nation. But God has shown me that I should not call any person common or unclean. So when I was sent for, I came without objection. I asked then why you sent for me. And Cornelius said, Four days ago about this hour I was praying in my house at the ninth hour.

[3 : 1 9] And behold, a man stood before me in bright clothing and said, Cornelius, your prayer has been heard, and your alms have been remembered before God. Send, therefore, to Joppa and ask for Simon, who is called Peter.

He is lodging in the house of Simon and Tanner by the sea. So I sent for you at once, and you have been kind enough to come. Now, therefore, we are all here in the presence of God to hear all that you have been commanded by the Lord.

So Peter opened his mouth and said, Truly, I understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation, anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him.

This is the word of the Lord. You may be seated. Good morning and welcome to Holy Trinity Church.

We are glad that you are here, and especially if you are visiting with us, you have come on a very significant and enjoyable day. We arrive at a seminal moment and experience in the text that was read.

[4 : 42] Let me get into it this way. Human history, if it has shown us anything, has proved this. Religious discrimination on the basis of race or culturally identifying distinctions is no respecter of time or place or ideology.

Now, those of us who are followers of Jesus might like to think that when Christianity entered into the scene, things would be different. But when you explore the history of the Christian church in its past, and when you consider the discussions concerning the Christian church in its present, it doesn't take long for anyone to realize we have a mixed bag of reviews.

For indeed, the axiom is this, religious discrimination on the basis of race or culturally identifying distinctions is no respecter of time, place, or ideology.

You might like to think that following Jesus would have made all things different, but the text today indicates that even the supreme follower of Jesus, Peter himself, only came on to these things slowly, behind the times, after the fact.

But you might then recognize that for three consecutive weeks, beginning today, you are going to be looking at a scene between this follower of Jesus, Peter, and this centurion by the name of Cornelius that has something to teach to the church.

[6 : 39] If I were to demonstrate for you three episodes that unfold in chapters 10 and 11, today you are looking at the first.

And here I would call it the conversion of Peter. The conversion of Peter, particularly as he comes to the understanding of the universality of Jesus' mission.

It's followed next week by the conversion of Cornelius to the exclusivity of the Jesus message.

And then beyond that, three weeks from now, the conversion of the Jerusalem church from their self-styled superiority concerning the mind of Jesus.

Now, Rommel Williams, who preaches down at 107th and Michigan, after laying out that threefold look at the coming weeks, might say, Oh, I like the way that sounds.

[7 : 44] The conversion of Peter concerning the universality of the mission. The conversion of Cornelius concerning the exclusivity of the message.

And the conversion of the Jerusalem church on its self-styled superiority on the mind of Jesus. How do we hold 35 verses in 20 minutes time?

With simplicity. The opening scene in verses 1 through 8 demonstrate a hope that things might be different.

Notice how we are introduced to one named Cornelius. And in this man, two movements of thought through the words of Luke give you an understanding of who he is.

By cultural identification of both place, race, and profession, he is Roman to the core. He's a centurion known to be of the Italian cohort.

[8 : 57] In the ancient world of Rome, who ran the world at that time, a legion of soldiers was as strong as 4,000 to 6,000 men.

A cohort would have been some 600 or so. A centurion would have been one who was an officer equivalent to the captain in our own system over perhaps 60 to 80, or if you actually round the whole thing out beautifully, 100 men.

This was a man who had immense military experience, would have probably served in the military as a lifelong profession, would have taken some time to rise in the ranks of Rome.

He was a man among men who knew how to go to war, and most importantly knew how to have those go to war behind him.

He's a centurion. But notice of the Italian cohort, you're already beginning to feel the weight of Rome. A Roman.

[10 : 10] In the ancient day, Judaism, even prior to Christianity, had an uneasy relationship with Rome.

They needed Rome to provide protection and cover for their religious identity, but they were often squashed by Rome in regard to the freedom or the power in which they wanted to exercise it. Indeed, some even longed for the day when Rome would be in the rearview mirror and their own world would find its way to transcendent strength. So here he is.

A man of the world. A man among men. A man who commands the respect of all people. But notice, verse 2, it describes him also as a devout man.

And that term has a religious identity to it. Notice how it unfolds. To be a devout man, a devoted man, was to be one who feared God with his household, here it is, giving alms and praying.

[11:18] He gave to the poor. In other words, he was a righteous man. We know in the Old Testament scriptures, part of what it was to be a righteous man was to give to the poor. And so here's one who willingly, although he had a place of power over people, was nevertheless internally generous toward people, living well horizontally, but also attempting to live well vertically.

A man who was praying, asking God to be involved in the affairs of his own day. This is a man who's there. Now notice, the hope that things might be different aren't merely identified with who he is, but what happens to him.

A vision comes in the midst of prayer, and a word comes, an angel, a fearsome creature, who says to him, your prayers and alms have ascended as a memorial before God.

You can put your eyes on it in verse 4. And then gives him instructions to send someone to Simon, called Peter, whose lodging was Simon, the tanner, whose house overlooks the sea in Joppa, where we left him last, in chapter 9 and verse 43.

Get it? It wasn't merely that he had a religious experience that gave us hope. It's that God had heard him and would send someone to speak to him that he might move beyond some spiritual subjective experience of a divine to actually a revelation concerning what he is to know or do, concerning the divine.

[13:05] And so, the hope, in verses 1 to 8, rests with the truth that there was a God who would make himself known.

And he would make himself known to one who was outside the pale of all the promises given by God through the people of Israel.

That's real hope. The hope is there. God wants a word with the world.

Well, part 2. 9 through verses 16 or so. It's one thing to have hope that things will be different concerning religious discrimination.

But what kind of heart must be overcome to make us think things might actually be different?

Welcome to the heart that must be overcome if things will be different.

[14:12] Welcome to Simon Peter, the chief follower of Jesus, the leader of the pack, the proclaimer of the word, and the last one now to get in line with the mission of his Lord.

The next day, it says, as they were on their journey approaching the city, they've already then begin moving toward Peter because God has told Cornelius there's hope that religious discrimination given who he is will be no barrier to a relationship.

And Peter is likewise in prayer, being religious as he is, and he falls into a trance. I can almost see him on the roof on the Mediterranean, a good spot for vacation there in Joppa.

And as he's looking over the waters and as he's elevated in nature and as he's offering his prayers before God, he too has a vision, two visions. Two visions. The first vision to Cornelius, there's hope for you.

The second vision to Peter, there's a hardness of heart that must be overcome in you. And notice the dancing, trance-like vision he has.

[15:32] Verse 11, a sheet, almost like a sail as it were, on a ship descending, being let down on its four corners upon the earth and in it are all kinds of animals and reptiles and birds of the air.

And there came a voice and said to him, Rise, Peter, kill and eat. But Peter said, By no means, Lord. I have never eaten anything that is common or unclean.

Resistant to the vision. And the voice came to him a second time. What God has made clean do not call common. Silence.

This happened three times. And the thing was taken up at once to heaven. I want to talk about this heart that must be overcome concerning religious discrimination on the basis of race.

Here was the privileged one, the elect one, the holder of the majority culture of Jesus one. This was the ultimate insider and he was by nature a separatist.

[16:49] In other words, he was holy in his own way. In his own way. Leviticus chapter 11, a word given to Moses centuries before this experience outlined the foods that followers of Jehovah were to partake in and animals and foods that they were to resist taking.

in. If you go back and read Leviticus 11, it is enjoyable for its humor in the sense that of those foods that they were to eat, it had to be an animal that would eat the cud and part the hoof.

And so what begins to happen in Leviticus 7 is there a distinction made between the foods that followers of Judaism would actually adhere to and foods that they would call common or unclean. So the camel was not good on the table nor the rock badger nor the hare nor the pig. The first three of them chew the cud but don't part the hoof.

The last one parts the hoof but doesn't chew the cud. And so all of a sudden in Leviticus 11 what begins to emerge is that these animals which are clean or unclean are to represent Israel's distinction from the nations so that there would be a holy and an unholy in the world.

[18:36] A contrived as you will a temporal suspension of reality as it was so that people in the world would know God is unlike human beings as Israel is unlike the nations.

And then in Leviticus 11 they are told that they are not to eat these because they are related to what it means to be of God or not. In other words and these you shall detest and by them you shall become unclean.

I love this. Whoever touches their carcass shall be unclean until evening. Whoever carries part of the carcass shall wash his clothes and be unclean until evening. And here's Peter staying at the house of Simon the tanner.

A man whose very profession would then if he was following Leviticus 11 would have required him to go to work in the unholy and wash himself before dinner and clean his clothes before dinner so that as he enters in the house where his guest Peter is all is good and well.

This though is overturned by God in this vision. This privileged one, this elect one, this hard hearted one had to understand that with God all people have the ability to be clean.

[20:18] All people have equal access to relationship. That the separatists must become the inclusivist. And so he hears the hope that is given to Cornelius, the vision that demonstrates the hardness of heart that must be overcome in Peter gives way to, in these verses that follow, verses 17 and following, this independent, and this is very important, this independent verification that what Peter had seen or experienced was connected to what God actually wanted.

Notice verse 17, now while Peter was perplexed, the men are already standing at the gate. Or it says in verse 16, and while he was pondering what it meant, the Spirit actually tells him, these men are coming for you and you're to go with them because I'm in this.

And so then he comes down the stairs and all of a sudden he's presented with those who have said, in all of their un-Judaistic cultural convictions, Cornelius, a centurion, is asking you to come to his house.

Let me move. Part three. What are the hints that evidence from this text that things could be different? Hint number one, verse 23, hospitality.

So he invited them to be his guests. I'm thinking of Sidney Poitier. You want a title for this message?

[22:11] Guess who's coming to dinner? John, in the book and in the play and in the movie, you know I just had a thought.

Why don't I go check into a hotel and get some rest and you go find your folks? The black man and the white woman wrestling in the mid-50s on an issue that continues to demonize us today.

I'll go to the hotel, you go find your folks. But here's the first hint, that Peter began to understand or be converted to the universality of Jesus' mission.

He invited them to be his guests. It's quite stunning. Tacitus, the historian, writes concerning the Jews, they sit apart at meals and they sleep apart.

No table fellowship and no spare bedroom in the back. But Peter invites them to be his guests. There is the hope in this text that things could be different.

[23:39] There is the hardness of heart that has to be overcome by majority culture folk if it is to be different. and the first hint that it might surprisingly actually be capable of being different is the majority culture religious Peter opens his door and across the threshold he actually begins to demonstrate signs of table fellowship.

Hospitality has been one of the two words we're trying to grow in all year. hospitality and prayer. We'll work on prayer tonight 730 together. We got to work on hospitality all the while. What a wonderful thing it is. And I speak as an American American and as a white man with all of our own issues historically and in a contemporary way and our own culture.

The majority culture person will demonstrate signs that we are getting on with the multifaceted mission of Jesus when our doors are open as they should always have been. second hint not just hospitality but a measure of equality.

[25 : 22] The man falls at Peter's feet but in verse 26 Peter lifted him up saying stand up I too am a man. this is not hospitality given to the outsider Cornelius but equality extended to the outsider Cornelius.

This was finally an indication of shared humanity. This was nothing less than a multi racial multicultural moment of verbal expression that says I am you and you are me.

I am but a man. And so this subservient position which we've seen in Acts all the way along comes to the people who hold the power whether it be Barnabas who laid down his land at the apostles feet.

They were the men of power. whether it be Ananias and Sapphira who came down to the apostles feet there with the power. Whether it be someone falling at the apostles feet who had the power. Now finally the apostle himself says up off your feet. We have already shared a meal with our two families.

[26 : 52] We now will stand together for we share nothing more than our humanity. Finally. You can call it a leveling of the ground and it didn't come until chapter 10.

Hospitality, equality, but notice the third thing that tells you things might be different is his partiality is finally repudiated.

You can see it there in verse 34 and 35. So Peter opened up his mouth and said truly I understand that God shows no partiality but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him.

There it is. Something he does, hospitality. Something he says, shared humanity. Something he now begins to believe or understand.

No partiality and I repudiate it. For indeed my repudiation of partiality rests in the very character of God because God himself is not partial. Think of it.

[28 : 03] Why do we have to protect the widow today? Why do we have to protect the orphan? Why do we have to protect the child in the city? Why? Because we're partial.

It's part of the human heart. Years ago I took my children to the beach, 57th Street Beach. Noah was older. I told them run and have fun. My youngest daughter was little.

I hovered over her with all kinds of care. If someone had come, if you had come and said it seems to me that you love your daughter more than you love your son, I would say you don't know anything of my character.

I am partial to the one who's vulnerable. people. Not because I have a partiality of character to her, but because I am impartial in my character.

I love my son and my daughter the same, but because I love them the same, I must demonstrate a partiality toward those who are poor. Why? Because we live in a world filled with partiality.

[29 : 10] Peter is finally getting it. He repudiates the partiality that had been embedded in his soul. Think about it.

Religious discrimination, no respecter of time, no respecter of person, no respecter of ideology. Yet there is hope because God wants the world.

And for him to get it, there's a hardness of heart that's going to have to be relinquished. And if you want a hint that this congregation is on about it, then let's take a look in the next ten minutes of all the kinds of people that are going to walk down this row and share in one supper.

Take a look, especially those of you who don't believe yet. Take a look because what you're going to see is a three-dimensional living expression that things can be different.

How? How? We come to the exclusivity of the message, the death of our Lord Jesus Christ, of which Paul said concerning the practice of the church.

[31 : 04] For I delivered to you what I received from the Lord, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed, he took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, this is my body which is for you.

Do this in remembrance of me. In the same way also he took the cup after supper saying, this cup is the new covenant. The Lord