

The Conversion of Peter

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[0 : 00] In the book of Acts chapter 10 on verse 34, we hear these words from the apostle Peter. I now know that God shows no partiality, no favoritism.

Let us pray. May the words of my mouth and the meditation of all our hearts be pleasing in your sight, O Lord, our Lord.

Our rock and our redeemer. Amen. I wonder if you recognize the sculpture in this picture.

Many of us have happy memories of taking the short ferry ride across the River Amund at Crammond to walk along the shore of the Firth of Forth.

It was here in 1997 that the ferryman noticed what seemed to be a carved stone lying in the river. It looked remarkably like the head of a lion.

[1 : 07] And so it proved. On retrieval from the riverbed and after expert inspection, the stone proved to be a Roman-era sculpture. One of the most important Roman finds ever made in Scotland.

It is reckoned to be from the tomb of a senior Roman officer or official at the nearby Roman fort at Crammond. According to Wikipedia, the sculpture depicts a bound male prisoner being killed by a lioness.

The upper torso and head of the prisoner are shown with the giant lioness behind him sinking her teeth into his skull.

Just what you want for your front garden to ward off unwelcome visitors. The Crammond lioness, as it has become known, brings us directly from Scotland today into the world of our story from the Book of Acts.

The world of the Roman Empire. In the opening verses of Acts chapter 10, before the passage that Jennifer read to us, we read about a Roman centurion called Cornelius.

[2 : 30] He is an officer in charge of a military unit of 100 soldiers in the Roman army. Cornelius is stationed in Caesarea, a major seaport city on the eastern Mediterranean, which Herod the Great had built and named in honor of the Roman emperor Caesar Augustus.

By the time of Jesus and the apostles, Caesarea had become the administrative capital of the Roman province of Judea. Stationed then in this great Roman city, Cornelius had a reputation as a pious, God-fearing Gentile who feared the God of Israel with all his household, supported the local Jewish community in Caesarea with donations to their poor, and led a life of prayer.

We learn about such people in the Roman Empire. Gentiles, not Jews, who didn't become circumcised Jews themselves, but who were drawn to the worship of the God of Israel.

In Scotland, we would call such worshippers adherents, rather than full members. Cornelius was certainly one of them, a devout adherent of the Jewish synagogue.

One day, while at prayer, Cornelius has a vision from God. He is told to send men to fetch someone called Simon, also known as Peter, who is to be found in another seaport further down the coast, a town called Joppa, but not the local one.

[4 : 17] Cornelius is shaken by this vision, and given no explanation of why he should send for Peter.

But recognising this as the voice of the Lord, he dutifully sends off a fellow devout soldier from his unit, whom he trusts to find Peter in Joppa.

In the meantime, as this search party from Cornelius is on its way from Caesarea down the coast to Joppa, Peter himself has a vision.

A strange and equally disturbing vision. As a devout Jew, Peter is at prayer. But he's hungry. While waiting for food to be prepared, according to his strict Jewish dietary laws, he falls into a trance.

And perhaps not surprisingly, he dreams of food. Peter has a vision of a sheet being lowered down from heaven.

[5 : 24] The sheet is filled with what a devout Jew would recognise as a mixture of clean and unclean animals and birds. According to the strict Jewish dietary laws that establish what a Jew could eat and what they cannot eat.

But in the vision, Peter is called on to kill and eat these creatures. All of them, clean and unclean alike. Peter is appalled at this prospect and refuses to do so as an observant Jew.

He says, By no means, Lord. No way, Lord. I've never eaten anything that is unclean. Now remember, Peter is a devout Jew, yes, who believes that Jesus is the long-promised Messiah of Israel, the one sent by God to bring in God's kingdom on earth as it is in heaven.

But Peter, at this point, also believes that he must observe these dietary laws to please God. And so the voice from heaven has to tell, not once, not twice, but three times, what God has made clean, you must not call unclean.

Peter recognizes this as a true voice from heaven. But he is puzzled and perplexed by it. He does not yet understand the meaning of this strange vision.

[7 : 03] He does not yet grasp the world-shaking implications of this call to eat these unclean creatures. But he's about to.

The delegation from Cornelius then arrives in Joppa to ask Peter to accompany them back up the coast to Caesarea to speak with their Roman master, whom they describe to Peter as an upright and God-fearing man who is well spoken of by the whole Jewish nation.

It is perhaps at this point that Peter begins to grasp the full implications of his strange, unsettling vision.

Just as it had been forbidden to eat unclean foods, it was also forbidden for Jews to sit at table with unclean foreigners. But if God, in a dream, had told Peter to eat unclean food, he must now sit at table with an unclean foreigner, this Roman centurion.

Devout Jews in the Roman province of Judea at the time were well used to living with the tension of mixing with members of the occupying Roman army while remaining loyal to their strict holiness codes about what they could eat and who they could eat with at table.

[8 : 32] Do you remember Jesus himself? Met with a centurion. So it's perhaps not surprising that Peter was willing to accept this invitation to meet with this God-fearing Roman centurion.

What did surprise Peter was what happened next. Cornelius is clearly overwhelmed on meeting Peter. Luke says that he falls at Peter's feet and worships him.

Peter's response This is a perennial temptation for religious leaders. Undue adulation. Peter's response was robust.

Stand up! I'm only a man. A mere mortal. And then Peter addresses the assembled gathering in the home of Cornelius. Cornelius has gathered his family and his friends.

They're all eager to hear from this man. But they don't yet know why. Peter tells them of his recent change of mind as a devout Jew.

[9 : 36] Following his vision from God. He says, You yourselves know that it is unlawful for a Jew to associate with or to visit a Gentile, a non-Jew.

But God has shown me that I should not call anyone profane or unclean. So when I was sent for I came without objection.

Now may I ask why you sent for me? Cornelius then tells Peter the story of his own vision. How God had heard his prayers, remembered his almsgiving to the Jewish poor of Caesarea and told him to ask for Peter.

Therefore, says Cornelius, I sent for you immediately and you have been kind enough to come. So now all of us are here in the presence of God to listen to all that the Lord has commanded you to say.

Cornelius in turn has finally grasped the meaning of his vision. He and his family are called not to worship God's messenger but to be receptive to God's message.

[10 : 58] If it takes two to tangle, it takes two to tangle with Jesus. A humbled preacher and a listening congregation. As Peter begins to speak to them, it is now evident that he too has grasped a bit more of the meaning of his vision and the significance of his encounter with this godly foreigner.

He said, I truly understand that God shows no partiality, no favoritism, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him.

It is only then after his prejudice against these foreigners has been overthrown by God that Peter is in a position to tell his compelling story about Jesus.

First Peter tells of the message that God sent to the people of Israel that they were to find peace with God through God's anointed Jesus the Messiah who is, says Peter, the Lord of all.

And because he is the Lord of all, says Peter, not just the Jews, Peter tells his Gentile audience that this compelling story of what God has done in the life, the death, the resurrection and the heavenly reign of this Jesus of Nazareth which he, Peter, is denied with us.

[12:35] This is also good news for them too, the Roman foreigners whom he once thought unclean, beyond the pale, untouchable, unacceptable, to be feared and avoided.

On hearing this message about Jesus while Peter is still speaking and therefore he can call on them to respond in repentance, Cornelius and all his household receive the Holy Spirit praising God with the Spirit's gift of other tongues.

Peter is taken aback by these events but he recognizes that this is the same Holy Spirit who came upon him and his fellow Jewish disciples on the day of Pentecost who has now come upon this Roman soldier and his Gentile household as fellow believers in Jesus and so he baptizes them as fellow members of his church though he once thought them unclean.

Do you see the extraordinary journey of conversion that the apostle Peter has been on which comes to a climax here in Acts chapter 10 in his encounter with Romans and Julian Cornelius.

It was we saw last Sunday the conversion of the apostle Paul is sudden and dramatic. The conversion of the apostle Peter is slow and unfolds over a lifetime.

[14:17] Peter's conversion happens in stages. First he has to be forgiven and then given a fresh start. In John's gospel we read that Peter denied his Lord three times before the crucifixion.

Only for Jesus to ask him three times to feed his sheep after the resurrection. Then Peter has to overcome his prejudice against foreigners learning that God has no favorites.

The Jew who once recoiled from eating unclean food becomes the guest of honour in the home of a foreigner who he baptizes into the one new humanity of the church where there is neither Jew nor Gentile men or women black or white abled or disabled but all are one in Jesus Christ.

The Jews of the ancient world the apostle Peter among them had good reason to fear the Romans who had conquered and occupied their land. Romans like this centurion Cornelius.

The crab and lion tells us why. The statue of a lion's mouth crushing the head of a brisket. The Roman Empire of which we in Scotland were on the edge the Roman Empire was a military killing machine that showed no pity to its enemies and perceived inferiors.

[15:55] In Caesarea alone where Peter had his encounter with Cornelius thousands of Jewish prisoners would later be slaughtered for entertainment in the gladiatorial games.

As Jill reminded us in our prayers the powerful lines of this world are still crushing the heads of the vulnerable whether in the violence of wars or the algorithmic hatreds of social media but we know we know that other stone the builders rejected Jesus that he has become the chief cornerstone of building a better world.

We have this remarkable story in the book of Acts chapter 10 of an encounter between a spiritually searching foreigner Cornelius and a failed and forgiven apostle Peter.

They both have visions from God as in the story of Paul and Ananias in Acts chapter 9 they both undergo conversion to the way of Jesus the Messiah and his message of peace and as in the story of Paul and Ananias their conversion ends in spending time together when we read the baptized centurion invites the converted apostle to stay with him for several days.

Yet again we learn from Peter's story as we learn from Paul's story that conversion in the book of Acts and in the New Testament is not about having some dramatic and sensational personal story to tell in isolation.

[17:48] It is about being welcomed into the family of the church and the new humanity in Jesus Christ as forgiven sinners and baptized saints.

If the world asks you what a converted Christian life is like then we must show them not the testimony of celebrities but the track record of communities like this one where we meet together eat together worship together and work together across all our differences because we have all found peace with God and with one another through this Jesus who is Lord of all.

I now know that God shows no partiality said Peter and in a world still torn apart by hatred so now do we.
Amen. Amen. Amen.