

Peter And Cornelius - Do Not Hesitate To Go

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[0 : 00] I'd like to think together today about one of the most amazing life, epoch changing stories that we have in the whole of scripture. A story that Vernon read to us a few moments ago.

If you want to sum up the whole thing in just a few words, perhaps verse 20 of Acts 10 might be best. Do not hesitate to go. The growth of the church had been absolutely prodigious and that motley band of disciples had been energized by one event, followed by others, the meeting of with the risen a Christ.

And in an age when we are obsessed with strategies, policies, forward planning, I don't know what the alternative is to forward planning, and so much of the else that we find, what happens in the New Testament is in a dramatic contrast.

It was a case of go quickly and tell. And why was it such? Their lives were filled with a wonderful experience of their risen Christ, and they had met him in such a vital, life-changing way. It wasn't a case of forward planning to tell something that just could not help telling about Jesus.

And we must ask ourselves the question, am I impelled to go out with the message? We don't decry good planning and good policies, but if that basic element of being impelled by Jesus Christ is not there, whatever else we do is an utter waste of time. And in this age, don't let succumb to anything that would push that passion aside.

[2 : 03] Were the disciples ready to go out? The answer was an emphatic no in human terms.

They had no training. They were a bunch of blunderers. They hadn't got the necessary skill set, I might say, nowadays. Nothing in personnel management. No church legislation. None of that. They simply went out spreading the good news of Jesus.

And so they went out. And they went out to where the people were. They had the experience of Christ. And the training would follow on the job.

And we want to look at one of the world's greatest learning experiences today, in the experience of Peter and Cornelius. And if we take these lessons to heart, the world can be transformed.

One of the first steps we find is recorded in the previous chapter where Ananias was sent to meet with this awful person, Saul, who went about killing Christians.

[3 : 19] How on earth am I going to meet this man? And how on earth is God going to use him? But Ananias went. And the rest is history. Very wonderful history.

So then in the following chapter, we have this story of the centurion and Peter. Centurions are mentioned several times in the Gospels and in the Acts of the Apostles.

At Capernaum, the town of Capernaum, the centurion and servant was sick. And he got the Jewish elders of all people to fetch Jesus.

And in Matthew 8, a centurion calls Jesus Lord. And at the cross where Jesus died, these are wonderful words of the centurion.

Surely this was the son of God. Then in Jerusalem, the soldiers led by a centurion, rescued Paul from the Roman mob.

[4 : 23] And in fact, allowed Paul to speak to the mob. And when the mob heard the mention of the word Gentiles, they just went absolutely berserk.

And Paul had to be taken away. And then there's another mention where Paul's nephew advised of danger to Paul. And the centurion took the young man by the hand, compassionate and listening. Two centurions were in charge of Paul when he was taken from Jerusalem to Caesarea. And in Sidon, Julius the centurion allowed Paul to visit friends.

And then on the way to Rome, when the ship was actually sinking, the centurion saved Paul's life when the others would have killed him.

So there are many honorable mentions of centurions in the Bible. And this centurion lived in Joppa. He lived with his family in Caesarea.

[5 : 33] And it must have been a fairly peaceful place, but he lived with his family. Now if it had been a garrison under siege, certainly his family, it would not have been there. And we see the impact of the gospel.

An incomplete impact, but an impact nevertheless. What does it say about the centurion? He was devout. He was God-fearing. He gave generously to those in need.

And he prayed regularly. What a commendation. There's one thing missing that will become clearer. What happened? Well, God gave him a vision.

The first part of the vision was an affirmation that his prayers were listened to by God. It was not a vision after listening to a spooky story in the middle of the night.

It says it was in the afternoon and broad daylight. So that was quite amazing. So he wasn't off his head. But the interesting things to notice about this vision is that he got the vision when he was in the right place at the right time.

[6 : 40] He got the vision and he didn't question why. He just simply answered it. Despite the fact no reason was given. God's word was enough.

He acted on a vision. And he used the most suitable resources, a devout soldier and his servants, to go and fetch Peter. And he explained to them what it was all about.

There was involvement and we use another modern term, ownership. It's a perfect pattern of how to involve people in a task and how to get things done.

The story of the actions that the centurion took. It is quite amazing. So are we looking for guidance today? Something in life, some issue?

Perhaps an issue you can't even mention to anyone. Do remember that what Cornelius did. He was in the right place at the right time. He listened and he obeyed.

[7 : 39] And the guidance will come. Then there was the other character. And we're simply going through this story today. Around noon the following day when Cornelius men were on their way.

Peter went up to the roof to pray. He was hungry. But while the meal was being prepared, he received a vision. And the vision came.

Remember this when he was doing a basic task. Don't go into, creep into some corner or some cloister or climb up to a mountain top to get a vision. Peter was, got the vision when the meal was being prepared.

Visions come at any time in the most ordinary of circumstances. And the vision, the great sheet coming down from heaven with all kinds of animals.

Arise Peter, kill and eat. And of course, Peter, all his prejudices crept in. The ingrained prejudices which he had inherited and which plagued the whole of Judaism.

[8 : 40] Perhaps the idea of eating clean animals dates from the time when, as is so wonderfully laid out in the earlier books in the Pentateuch. That it was, they were for hygiene reasons.

But this had grown into a means of grace. The people got merit through doing things like, I'm not eating this, I'm washing my hands, I'm doing this, that and the next thing.

And that is one of the tragedies of a person who is not fully committed to Christ. That person always looks to something else to get merit.

And we have to challenge ourselves today as we face a communion next week. What am I claiming merit in? If it's in some ritual, some observance, some tradition.

No matter how good they are, they're all useless if we're not in the will of God. That's a challenge to all of us.

[9 : 45] And then the other prejudices that crept in with Peter. Prejudice is about diet. Then of course there was a prejudice about the Gentiles.

Over the centuries, there had been built up a profound sense of arrogance about, on the part of the Jews, about Gentiles. And they had twisted the whole meaning of scripture.

They were the chosen of God. And instead of being humble, they had turned it into a contempt for all other races.

In complete contradiction of God's will. They would not enter the houses of Gentiles. They would not eat with them. They would not socialize with them.

John Stott, that wonderful writer, says, It is difficult for us to grasp the impossible gulf which yawned in those days between Jews in one hand and Gentiles in the other.

[10:48] An impossible gulf. And Peter was still soaked in that culture, despite his experience of Christ. The interesting thing was, and this is on the side, I only noticed this very recently, that he stayed in the house of one Simon the Tanner.

Now what does a Tanner do? He deals with the skins of dead animals. And that must have been a very unworthy task in the eyes of many Jews.

So Peter had come some way in getting rid of his prejudices. Peter questioned the command. But in God's perfect timing, the centurion's men were approaching, and the spirit called them to go downstairs and meet.

Verse 20, Do not hesitate to go with them. The phrase could also mean making no distinction. He invited the visitors into the house.

[11:52] Intriguing thing, I would think, after this revelation. It's perhaps slightly irreverent, but what did they have for dinner that night?

That would have been a real test. Did they have roast pork? I'm not quite sure, but it's quite an interesting thought after this revelation.

Then they went to Caesarea. And what happened at Cornelius' house? Cornelius had got a lot of people together to hear what Peter had to say.

He was wrong in falling at Peter's feet. Peter said, Well, I'm just a man, an ordinary person. Peter got straight to the point in admitting that he was wrong.

All men are equal to God. He was not to call anyone or anything common or unclean. So there was set on foot one of the greatest changes in attitude in history.

[12:52] What an absolutely world-shattering message that was. I'm an ordinary man. Nothing and nobody is common or unclean.

Then in Galatians are these wonderful words about being all one in Christ Jesus. There is neither Jew nor Greek.

There is neither slave nor free. There is neither male nor female. You are all one in Christ Jesus.

And these three key key groups were the groups in which masses of prejudice was.

Prejudice against slaves. Prejudice against Jews, against Greeks, and men against women. So much prejudice hung on that. And here is this word coming in. I said, You're all one in Christ Jesus. No wonder there was such opposition to the gospel of Christ. Then Peter went on to ask, Why did you ascend for me?

[14:00] The wonderful thing is that Peter got obeyed before he got the explanation. Am I waiting for explanations before I obey? That is a very challenging question we can take from this story.

And Cornelius gave his simply reply that he had simply done what had been told to do by the angel. Go and send for Peter. No ifs, no buts.

Exclamations are not always at the forefront of doing things for God. It's simply obedience. And we should not demand them. How complicated we can make things.

Then after that, there was Peter's, well you couldn't call it a sermon. It was a masterly piece of explanation of the word of God. Vernon didn't, we didn't have time to read it when Vernon was doing that.

But he tells of how God worked through history and culminating in Jesus Christ. It's a masterly piece of writing that Peter was inspired to give at that particular time.

[15:08] So that was the story. It must have been an absolutely wonderful meeting in that house. We think of it being crowded out with Jews and Roman soldiers and all sorts of people worshipping at the feet of Jesus.

And making that wonderful discovery that Jesus can transform a life instantly. And so they went out. We could go on and on about that.

But we must hasten on. The following chapter is jumping into the cold bath chapter. Peter tells of reporting to the Jewish Christians in Jerusalem.

And what did they say? You went into the house of uncircumcised men and ate with them. It was like jumping into a cold bath. Imagine Peter full of enthusiasm. Enormous blessing.

And Caesarea. And he goes back to Jerusalem. And that's what happens. Do not be surprised when trouble comes your way or when people, if you're seeking to serve the Lord, just totally fail to appreciate this.

[16:21] Never be surprised about the direction it comes from. The problem can often come from where you least expect it. Just keep going as Peter did.

And he kept going. And they soon realized that God's purposes were also for the Gentiles. And so the word spread and spread. Now in conclusion, what do we draw from this story?

Well I suggest one thing is this. The readiness they showed. On Peter's part, the barrier as we have seen was absolutely immense.

Not even the witness of Christ in his daily example, valuing everyone was nearly enough to change people's mind. Jewishness ran so deeply in its veins.

The clean and clean distinction was something that really hindered the spread of the gospel by undervaluing people. It was something that went against the whole idea of all God's creation being good.

[17 : 24] This was no superficial understanding. It coloured everything. But Peter was ready to change. His home was open to the Gentiles.

Then the readiness on Cornelius part was a very big matter. His official position as that of a Roman officer in charge of a hundred men in an occupation army was very dodgy.

And also with the growth of emperor worship. When Augustus had died, when the emperor Augustus had laid the foundations for autocracy.

It has an almost direct comparison with what we're witnessing in Russia today. It's chilling this. If you read about Augustus. How he grabbed everything towards himself.

So Cornelius was ready. And it was a high risk readiness. So what have I got to ask myself? What barriers do I have to overcome?

[18 : 26] Belief. Some practice I think is very important. The key question when facing such issues is what is best for Christ's kingdom?

What would I have to set aside? What does he want me to do? So there was a readiness they showed. There's also the lessons they learned.

The biggest was that God's grace has no boundaries. My prejudice about someone. Oh I'm full of prejudice of course about people. God's grace has no boundaries.

Ours is not the job of putting limits on Christ's kingdom. The lessons, the consequences for the lessons learned were immeasurable. They learned a lesson.

And the word of God exploded across the world. And then there was also, there was the readiness assured. There were the lessons that they learned.

[19 : 25] The breaking down of prejudice. And then finally, there was a new appreciation of the richness of the diversity of people across the world.

Some folk, like the Jews, lived in a cultural desert. But what a wonderful variety of people that is across the globe. And we've come to experience it in many occasions in this congregation.

One of the things we learned is that we're all the same in our need of Christ. And we're all the same in human nature. We're all exactly the same. And so we can all appreciate one another in the same way.

Now being able to meet with Gentiles at meals tables, that was a huge 80 change. But in Christ, it was so much more. They were one in Christ Jesus.

If the Gentiles were hurt, the Jews were hurt. If the Greeks were hurt, the Jews were hurt. If the women were hurt, the men were hurt.

[20 : 30] We were one in Christ Jesus. A new appreciation of the human race. And also, an enriched idea of God's creation.

Because there was richness in the great diversity of animal species. And their associated features. No longer would some animals be mentally and physically binned.

Peter was able to look at creation with new eyes. And see a new beauty in God's creation. Wasn't that all so wonderful?

All so wonderful. The readiness assured. The lessons learned. And then, finally, the blessings which resulted. We know what happened.

The word could not be stopped. Soon there would be saints in Caesar's household at the heart of the empire. Peter could write later, To you who believe he is precious. Who is going to harm you if you are eager to do good?

[21 : 33] He simply would not be scared of. What did they get? They got liberty in Christ. They got freedom in relationships. They got enrichment in sharing.

And a joy that would never end. Thank you, Peter. Thank you, Cornelius. But most of all, thanks be to our Lord Jesus Christ.

Shall we bow in prayer? Lord our God, we thank you for the wonderful change that your grace brings. And we pray that that might work in us today, each one of us. That we might not feel detached from these incidents. But may we seek to follow Jesus in the way the centurion and Peter did. And so discover immense, immeasurable riches and indestructible hope. In Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. Amen.