

Cornelius: The Brigade Commander

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Date: 25 September 1991

Preacher: Harry Robinson

[0 : 0 0] And there's some concern in my mind as to in these days when Canada is caught up in its constitutional crisis, whether what happens here on Wednesday at noon has any relevance to the great issues of our day or not.

But with a certain stubborn persistence, I'd like to suggest that it does. I was reading in the paper last night that what's happening in Canada, in many countries of Europe, it was suggested, would be done with blood in the streets.

And that Canada has this, what the Europeans regarded as a kind of fanatical commitment to being irenic, to working things out peacefully.

And so there may be a lot that we can be proud of in trying to establish some kind of constitution in which people from very different backgrounds come together and decide what it means to be part of the same country.

If you're a Newfoundlander or if you belong to the Quebecois or whether you come from Ontario. I'll pause just for a moment of, you know, quiet reflection on that great center of the country.

[1 : 2 5] And then the provinces underrepresented and misunderstood the Aboriginal people.

And the fact that everybody is stirred up with a concern, which I think at its best could be interpreted as enlightened self-interest.

That is, what's in it for me? And that you bring together a constitution which will satisfy, as far as is possible, the whole country saying there is something in it for me that makes it worthwhile for me, therefore I will support it.

Now whether it's humanly possible to do that or not, I think still remains to be seen how many people can be satisfied that there's something in it for me that makes it worthwhile.

And the thought that underlying this is the paper suggested was the redrawing of the map of North America. And they're very, very interesting times in which we live and the process through which we're going.

[2 : 4 6] And I have made one or two suggestions in my mind as to what could be done. And I've decided that the Aboriginal people should become Canada's royalty and that all the lieutenant governors and governor generals and all those high posts of aristocratic people should all be the Aboriginal people.

I believe that the vote should be given so that the people in Ontario vote for the representatives in Quebec and the people in Quebec vote for the representatives in Ontario so that they can be concerned for their neighbors.

That kind of neighborly concern might be a good idea. And there's all sorts of remote possibilities, I suppose, which could be considered in trying to put together a community of people.

Now it fits in very well with what I wanted to say today because I want to talk about Cornelius the centurion at Caesarea and the story which comes in Acts chapter 10.

Just the introductory paragraph has been read today and it goes on through chapter 10 and is recapitulated in chapter 11. So you should, if you have a chance, read the whole thing and to see what happens when you have this man Cornelius.

[4 : 13] You will remember that this manuscript is the Gospel of Luke and that the Gospel of Luke was written for a very distinguished Roman citizen whose name was Theophilus in order to convince Theophilus that underlying the whole of humanity in the whole of history was a constitutional agreement which was established not by the consensus of all the people who were part of the world but was established by God as a commitment of himself to all the people of the world.

And this story of this commitment or covenant that God made is described to us in the New Testament as being the new covenant.

The covenant between God and all the people of the world. And Luke is trying to, in writing this Gospel and in writing the Acts of the Apostles, which is the second volume of Luke, trying to show people that there is an underlying covenant by which all the people in all time and space come together in a constitutional agreement, the terms of which have been laid down by God.

That's a bit awkward for those of us who are constitution makers, but that was the way it was put together. And Luke is trying to persuade Cornelius about how it happens.

Cornelius is a centurion. A centurion is a captain in the army. He is a man who, I'm told, was chosen not to be bold and adventurous, to be a good leader, steady and prudent of mind, not prone to take offense or start fighting, but able when overwhelmed and hard-pressed to stand fast and die at his post.

[6 : 27] That's the kind of solid citizen. In your firm, you'll probably find all sorts of adventurous people at the top, but somewhere in the firm there will be the centurion types that keep the whole thing together and make it move in some kind of forward direction.

So you can understand the importance of this person. And it says a lot about him. It says that he was devout. It says that he was a man of prayer. It says that he was a man who gave alms regularly.

It says, moreover, that he had a family for which he had a peculiar care and concern, that he had a circle of friends, that when in his household there were servants that shared the kind of faith that he had, that under him were soldiers that shared the kind of faith that he had.

So he was a very, very impressive man. And it's hard, perhaps, to understand, but I think important to understand, that he was not a Christian.

Now, I'm almost embarrassed to tell you that because he is such a good man. And yet there is something that wasn't yet a part of his life.

[7 : 45] But I am persuaded that if you will read chapter 10 of Acts, you will see that he very much wanted it, something more in his life than he had already.

And that was the story of how it took place in Acts chapter 10. He prayed in the morning. He prayed at noon. He prayed at night. And prayer is not difficult.

Anybody can do it. It's just making the time. And that all of us are so preoccupied and overburdened with things that it's very difficult in our kind of society to pray because there is no time is given to you to do that kind of thing.

And it's amazing to think that this man, as it turns out in the story, was at home in the afternoon praying. I don't know what his commanding officer thought of that, but there he was.

There came to him an angel to speak to him. Now, angels appear in the New Testament at critical junctures. It's interesting that though the angel came to tell him what was going to happen, it didn't happen between him and the angel.

[9 : 03] What happened was between him and a fisherman named Peter. But bringing those two together was the work of the angel. So you have this distinguished person, this man, Cornelius, living in the city of Caesarea.

Caesarea is a port city on the coast of... This is the Mediterranean here.

Those are the seagulls and these are the waves. This is roughly where Jerusalem is on the shoulder of the Dead Sea at the bottom of the Jordan River.

And 65 miles northwest of there was the city of Caesarea, a port city on an open coast, which had a very elaborate harbor and which had been built by Herod the Great.

The Herods, and there was a number of them, were unique people in that they were kings of the Jews and of Judea. They were the royal personages within the structure of the Roman Empire.

[10 : 21] They were related mostly by marriage to the family of the emperors. They were also related by blood to the high priests in Jerusalem.

And they were totally committed to the Greek culture of the Roman Empire so that they were very well-connected people. And Herod the Great was a great builder.

And when you go to Jerusalem, one of the statements they make to you is that you came here to learn about Jesus and you spend most of your time learning about Herod because most of the archaeology, Herod built this, Herod built that, Herod did this, Herod was here, and it's all Herod.

But this was one of his projects, was the city of Caesarea. The city of Caesarea was the capital of the province of Judea.

And it was a place that was heavily imbued with Roman culture. It had a hippodrome for racing horses. It had a huge amphitheater where drama was presented and speeches and various gatherings of the people for various sporting events in the amphitheater.

[11 : 35] It had a huge temple there with a huge statue of the Emperor Augustus, which was in that way the official religion of the Romans.

And it was a center for Roman authority throughout the province of Judea so that you can sort of see a kind of Ottawa complex that it had in that they were in control.

And it's interesting, you see, that they couldn't do it in the natural capital of Judea, which was Jerusalem, because Jerusalem and the Jews who lived there considered themselves what you might describe as a distinct society, which wasn't going to mess around with any infiltration or pollution by Roman values, Roman culture, Roman literature, any of those things were not going to come into the city of Jerusalem.

And so they built this city and this is where the Herods had their palaces. This is where the governors, like Pontius Pilate, lived.

And it was there to which, where Paul was taken before he was, and there he appeared before the Herods in making his great defense at the end. And it was from there he was taken by a centurion, incidentally, to Rome as a prisoner.

[13 : 08] So that was the man, Cornelius. This was the place. And then you come to the messenger. And the messenger was St. Peter.

Peter was the one to whom Christ had committed the keys of the kingdom. And it was he that had taken those keys and opened the kingdom of God to the Jews at Pentecost.

He had opened the kingdom of God to the Samaritans. And in this story, he opens the kingdom of God to the Gentiles. Now, you can't get past the fact that in this story, there is a profound reality.

And that is that Peter was extremely Jewish. And Cornelius was extremely Roman. That was he subscribed to the ethics of the Jewish synagogue.

He probably subscribed to the monotheism of the Jewish teaching. He was not a circumcised Jew. He was a Gentile.

[14 : 23] And Peter had to overcome, as the messenger to him, had to overcome a lot of obstacles. It was for him to go and defile himself by entering into a Gentile house, defile himself by eating Gentile food, defile himself by touching anything that belonged to Gentiles.

The whole thing was wrong. And you know how difficult it is for us to overcome those kind of barriers in our society.

How difficult it is and how we keep retreating into our ethnic and racial and linguistic and social and cultural groupings where we understand one another, where we can relate to one another, where we can talk to one another, where we share values with one another, so that we come closer and closer together into a small group of people.

And people who don't belong to that just don't get there. Because in some unconscious way, we can structure the groups we belong to in such a way that nobody would attempt to belong.

And so you had one fellow on the CBC this morning apologizing for his sensitivity about the Quebecois.

[15 : 47] He says, but I've lived there, you see, so it's different for me. He had actually crossed the barrier. And he treated the rest of Western Canada as not being able to understand what he understood because he had crossed the barrier.

And crossing these barriers becomes increasingly difficult. In our society, more and more you are committed to a smaller and smaller group of people with whom you can relate and whom you can understand and whom you like and so on.

That happens all the time. That seems to be a tremendous thrust which takes over our lives. And it's very difficult to work against it.

It's very difficult to even begin to rationalize why you would work against it. Why the Jews can't be Jews and the Romans can't be Romans and the others can't be whatever they are and keep to themselves.

Why should they? And if you do trespass by going from one culture to another, all you can conceivably do is contaminate it by your presence.

[16 : 58] And yet this story is the story of Peter moving right out of his own culture to which he belonged into a totally alien culture to contaminate it by the gospel.

And that's why I think Christians are not understood because the Christian gospel is for everybody in every cultural and ethnical and linguistic group wherever it is.

It belongs to everybody. And that I think is one of the objectionable things about it. And Peter, who was living with Simon the Tanner in Joppa, and there's some question, you see, as to why Peter was at the house of a tanner.

I don't know if you've ever been at the house of a tanner. But it could be a fairly aromatic place to be, you might say.

In the church I was at in Toronto years ago, there was a tannery just down the road, and when the wind was in the right direction, breathing was extremely difficult simply because of the odor that came from the tannery, from the dead animals and from the hides and from the curing of the hides.

[18 : 24] But that's where Peter was, 30 miles away from Caesarea, up the coast, and there he was, and he was the one that was sent for by Cornelius.

Cornelius. Well, when he came, Cornelius, you see, had been told that this was the man who had a message from God for him, so that when he came to where Cornelius was, he fell on his face.

He prostrated himself before. He probably learned to do that in his culture. But imagine that this man, Peter, stood in front of Cornelius because God had sent for him, so Cornelius must have thought he must be a very, very, very important person indeed.

And he collapsed on the ground in front of him in prostration. And Peter said to him, I'm just a man.

There's nothing about me that is different. I myself also am a man, he said. And you get the lovely story of how Peter was welcomed into the house, of how the whole of Cornelius' family was there, the whole circle of his friends was there, the whole group he belonged to was there, and the statement, we are all here present in the sight of God to hear all the things that have been commanded thee of the Lord.

[20 : 03] there's some contrast between that and the sense one has on Sunday morning when you're about to preach a sermon, the sense that we are all here present in the sight of God to hear all things that have been commanded thee of the Lord.

They're somehow communicated to you that maybe not all of them, and maybe some of them just slight references to, but this man said, we want to hear it all.

And so, Peter was the one who gave the message, and he gave it by saying, the thing I'm most surprised about, he said, is that God wants you to hear this, which is a different approach, and I can hardly believe, he says, that God would want me to tell you that God considers you worth hearing this even.

This doesn't really belong to you, but I am unmistakably commanded by God to share it with you. And so, he tells them what the message is. And he says, it's the good news of peace through Jesus Christ.

In other words, that the world, which is constantly in a state of conflict all the time, and which television and newspapers bear witness to day after day after day, is conflict, conflict, conflict.

[21 : 34] And Peter says, but there is a place where peace has been established, and that peace has come into a world of total conflict, and it's going to make a difference.

And so, he tells him, and he says, you know about John the Baptist, you know how Jesus came to John, you know how he was baptized by John and was anointed by the Holy Spirit, you know how he went through the country teaching and doing good and casting out demons and healing people, you know all of those things, don't you?

And because this was the capital city of the province of Judea and the city of Jerusalem, all this was common knowledge, everybody had heard this.

Then Peter goes on to say, but we, and when he says we, he brought six people with him because he didn't know where he was going to and what was going to happen when he got there.

So he brought six good Jews from Joppa with him, Jews who had become Christians to see what took place. And he says, we are witnesses.

[22 : 41] We saw Jesus' good works and we saw him taken by the Jewish authorities and we saw them hang him on a tree as one who is cursed.

We saw all the good that he did, the teaching that he did, the miracles that he did. We saw all that and in contrast to that we saw them nail him to a tree.

And he says nail to a tree because the scriptures had taught that cursed is he who is nailed to a tree. And there was a symbolic significance to that which I guess he hoped they would understand.

And that's what they did to him. But he says, we also witnessed that on the third day God raised him up and we ate and drank with him and he charged us to preach, to testify, and to let the world know that he is the one who is to be the judge of the living and the dead.

In other words, it's through this man that the whole of humanity is going to be judged. The whole of humanity wonders and wonders and wonders about what the meaning of our life is.

[24 : 02] Peter says, the meaning of your life will become apparent to you when you stand before the judge. And the one whom God has appointed to be the judge is Jesus Christ.

He is to be the judge of the living and the dead. And then Peter added for them, he said, this is not new. This is what the prophets over the centuries have been saying would happen, and it's happened.

So you heard the story yourself of Jesus. We're telling you that we witnessed his death and his resurrection. We're here to testify this to you. We have been told to tell you that Jesus is to be your judge.

before whom you will be held accountable for your life. And he says, and in addition to that, that's what the prophets have been teaching all along.

Well, having said that to them, he concludes. But it's not over because the Holy Spirit falls on them.

[25 : 12] They speak in tongues and they are given a powerful experience of God among them. Something that shakes them. And that's what needs to happen.

That we talk about Christ until we come into the presence of Christ. And the presence of Christ is made known to us by his Holy Spirit. God is baptized.

And Peter says, be baptized. Be baptized into what? Be baptized into the faith of Christ, by which you become members of the covenant.

The covenant that God wants to draw all of you into. The covenant on which the whole of humanity is to come together in their relationship to Jesus Christ, in their relationship to the God who is the creator and redeemer and sustainer of the universe.

You come into that relationship. And so Cornelius and all his family and all the friends and acquaintances that he'd gathered together, having heard the message, having experienced the Holy Spirit, were baptized into the faith of Christ.

[26 : 36] and what happened then, you see, was that they were, by that, incorporated into the covenant. Now, the great question that our world is looking at, our particular country is looking at right now, is what does it mean to be a Canadian?

And we're having an agonizing time trying to decide what that means. And there's going to be much heart-searching, and a lot of things are going to go on to see if we can arrive at something which can mean that somebody can stand up in the Queen Charlotte's and say, I am a Canadian.

And somebody can stand up in Newfoundland and say, I am a Canadian. And somebody can stand up in Lafayette and John and say, I am a Canadian. And somebody in the Appalachian Valley can say, I am a Canadian.

And mean something by it, which is the same in each instance. This is what is happening here, is how do you learn to say, I am a Christian.

I am a Christian because I have accepted the terms of the covenant which God has offered to me in Christ. God has called me into that relationship.

[27 : 57] And when in the course of your being a Christian, you receive the bread and the wine of the Holy Communion, you are told that in a very tangible way in which you can take into your own hands, as you take that bread and wine, this is the covenant, the new covenant in my blood.

You are a member of it. You are sacramentally incorporated into it as you partake. So you see how cogent I think this is in terms of the struggle of our country.

The primary covenant we belong to is a covenant with God. And the terms of that covenant have been made to known to us in Jesus Christ. And we are called upon to respond.

In our country, as Canada, we are struggling with, what common basis have we got by which we can be committed to one another as Canadians?

In the same way that across every barrier and every tribe and every ethnic and linguistic and cultural group, we come together under the terms of the new covenant which has been established by God through Christ.

[29 : 21] let me say a prayer. Our God, our world is so small and your world is so big and yet you call us individually and personally to come to know you and to put our trust in you.

Thank you very much for the story of Cornelius. Thank you for the story of his family, his household, his circle of friends who with him were given the good news of peace through Jesus Christ and who by hearing the message and receiving the Holy Spirit were baptized into a new covenant, into a new relationship which transcended all the barriers in their lives.

So our God, help us as we struggle for a Canadian constitution to understand our primary membership in the covenant which you have established with us in Christ.

Amen.