

Jesus Bridges Cultural Gaps

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[0 : 00] Well, we're in the 10th chapter of Acts. If you look on the front of the bulletin, it says, Our current series of sermons are taken from the book of Acts, focusing on what God has to teach us about living for him today.

He died for us yesterday, that we might live for him today.

I guess that's what that means. And you'll see that the scope of the sermon is Acts 10, 4-48, so it's the whole chapter, but that wasn't read for you.

So I would like to talk to you for a minute about it all. There was the first of the Roman emperors, whose name was Octavian or Augustus.

Now, Augustus was the man who established the Pax Romana, the sort of civilization or culture which included the whole of the Mediterranean, North Africa, Palestine, Greece, and, of course, back to Rome and then up through Gaul and into Britain.

[1 : 29] And this first and great emperor was Augustus. And I think you have to remember what a superhuman feat that was.

The organization of the army, the organization of the civil service that allowed there to be a governor by the name of Pontius Pilate in the Roman province of Judea, governing many people of many languages, inheriting, it is true, the work of Alexander the Great three centuries before who had established a kind of Greek-speaking culture throughout that part of the world.

And it's likely that the conversation that we're reading about tonight took place in Greek. So you have Augustus, you have this huge administrative wonder, which was the Roman Empire with its armies and its civil services and the culture and art that belonged to it all and which stretched really from, I suppose, from Scotland down to this west end of the Mediterranean and beyond.

So it was a huge, huge thing. And try and think of the sculpture and try and think of the roads and try and think of law enforcement and try and think of law and all the things that were part of it.

And then focus in more clearly on one man, an Italian, who belonged to the Italian cohort, which was perhaps a famous regiment in the Roman army.

[3 : 29] And this man's name was Cornelius. And Cornelius was assigned with his family to go and live in Caesarea and to be part of the Roman garrison in that city.

Now, the coast along that part of the world, you've all heard of Tyre and Sidon. They were further north, and they're famous simply because there are some natural harbor facilities there, which allowed that to be one of the few ports on this coast of the Mediterranean.

But further down, there was Caesarea. And Caesarea was built from a desert with no harbor by Herod the Great.

That's the one that was there when the wise men came to see him at the time of the birth of Christ. So, he recognized that in order for the Romans to govern, as Romans do, this unruly province of Judea, they would have to have some kind of presence in the land, and Jerusalem wouldn't be it because Jerusalem then, as now, is a very unruly place, very difficult to govern, very religious, very steeped in its own culture, its own language, its own religion, and it would just have been impossible to do it.

And one of the problems that Pontius Pilate had there was that all the insignia of the Roman army, they weren't allowed to take them into Jerusalem, you see, on the grounds of the second commandment, which forbade engraven images of any kind.

[5 : 31] And the whole religion of the Jews was so fanatically enforced that the Romans simply couldn't govern from there without constant harassment.

And so what they did was they, Herod the Great, built this city, on the coast, and he was a tremendous builder. And the first thing you see, and the most obvious thing, is a great big viaduct that comes right along, almost just behind the beach, coming down from the north towards the city of Caesarea.

And it's a, you know, it's a 12-foot pipe made of stone and lifted up, sort of 10 feet above the ground to carry a water supply into this desert city on the coast.

I mean, it's an impressive thing, and it's been there since before the time of Christ. The ruins are there now, and quite obviously, it was a huge engineering project. Well, it went into the city which was named after the emperor Augustus, Augustus Caesar, so it was called Caesarea.

And this city was really the center of Roman presence in the province of Judea.

[6 : 57] That was where law and order was maintained. That's where the governor lived in a praetorium that belonged to him. There was a huge palace built there.

There was a magnificent harbor built there, which is still used by fishermen today to give them some protection from the open Mediterranean.

There was a hippodrome where they raced horses, and horses must have been a big part of that city. Seventy horsemen were required to escort Paul when he was brought as a prisoner to Caesarea.

So you can imagine a city full of horses and men who breed horses and men who race horses and men who have show horses and all those kinds of things in a magnificent horse palace, so to speak, where they looked after all these.

There was also a temple. And because shrewd Roman administrators recognized that religion was certainly one way of controlling people, they built this magnificent temple.

[8 : 11] and in this magnificent temple, there were huge statues of the Roman emperors, particularly Augustus. And it was a place for the worship of the emperors.

So it was a strange and wonderful city. It was a city that Herod Agrippa, a grandson of Herod the Great, came to. And this is recorded in Josephus and it's recorded in Acts.

It was a huge amphitheater there. And one day, a delegation came to visit King Herod, who was there as a visitor. And he, in this huge amphitheater, he stood up in the midst of a huge crowd of people.

and he had on a magnificent robe, which was of woven silver. And he, he stood and made a speech to the people.

And the people, I'm not sure why, but people sometimes do this, cried out, he's no longer a man, he's a god. And, in the midst of that performance, before all the people, being acclaimed as a god, Herod was stricken and carried out and died five days later.

- [9 : 43] But you can see that the tremendous pomp and ceremony that would have been part of that, of that show, was there that Paul subsequently was taken to be kept from the vindictiveness of the Jews in Jerusalem who wanted to kill him.
- He was taken to Caesarea and locked up in the praetorium there. And it was there that he addressed himself to the governor Festus and Berenice and Agrippa.
- The, it was, it was there also that Philip went after the Ethiopian eunuch had been converted, he went there and we're told subsequently that Philip lived there and in his home he had four daughters who were prophets and who prophesied.
- They were, and so that that home of Philip was one of the sort of early establishment of Christian faith in the midst of, in the midst of this Roman culture.
- you have, you have to remember that the Acts of the Apostles was written as the Gospel according to St. Luke was to high, a high Roman official, almost excellent Theophilus who was considered to be one of the senior members of the sort of Roman hierarchy and the, the whole purpose of the Acts of the Apostles and the Gospel of Luke was to explain to him the nature of the Christian faith so you can see what good stuff this was in order to convince him of the relationship.
- [11 : 32] Well, this was the man Cornelius and he lived in the midst of that with his wife and family and his servants and even people, quite minor Roman officials had magnificent entourages of family and servants and they lived in style.
- So he was totally immersed in the Roman culture of this Roman provincial capital of Caesarea and completely, I think, steeped in the culture of it.
- That was his background, that was his language, that was his upbringing, that was his life's work, that was his commission in the army. He was that, he was sort of comparable to a major in the British Raj in India about 1900.
- That's the kind of person he was, you know, totally contemptuous perhaps of the culture that surrounded him and very much in favor of all things British and everything that belonged to a proper British culture which they were prepared to impose on India.
- It must have been that kind of cultural setting in which Cornelius is illustrated in the tenth chapter of Acts.
- [12 : 56] He was a man totally ensconced in that except for one thing and a very peculiar thing it was too and that was that he apparently had some escape from it.
- Cornelius, it says, was a devout man who feared God and all his household and gave alms liberally to the people and prayed constantly to God and he was given a vision of God.
- When he talks about it later on in the passage that we've read tonight, you find about Cornelius, when Cornelius explains to Peter what happened, he said, four days ago about this hour I was keeping the ninth hour of prayer in my house and behold a man stood before me in bright apparel saying, Cornelius, your prayers have been heard and your alms have been remembered before God.
- So that what you have is a picture of a man who is totally involved culturally and yet has a private and secret life in which he believed God, he was a devout man, he prayed and gave alms and fasted.
- And what I think I would like you to be aware of is that I think all of us are what I would call culturally locked in.
- [14 : 45] Most of the way we live and most of the things we believe and most of the opinions we hold and most of the understanding we have is a kind of cultural headlock on you that forces you to think in a certain way.

You're often surprised by the way that you think but much of the way you dress, much of the way you present yourself, you have learned from the culture you belong to.

Last Sunday there came to church a couple from an engineer who for four years with his wife has been working on one of those CETA projects in Africa and he's just come back from Africa and I asked him how it was and he said well he's still reeling from the cultural shock of coming back to the land in which he has lived his life so most of his life.

So I would commend to you all that you get away from this culture sometime so as to come back and become aware at least in the first few days you're back what a totally how totally culturally conditioned you are in the way you speak the way you dress the way you behave the way you comport yourself all those things are are very much a part of the culture you belong to.

And I think that I see lots of people who I consider and I see this in myself in the same way but you see people who are totally locked in culturally that is the place of their belonging that is where they draw their value system from that is where their ideas come from that's where their concepts everything they do the whole pattern of their family life and personal life all the values and all the ethics and all the philosophy of life tends to be drawn from that culture that's what they belong to.

[16 : 46] that's why some kids react against it and form a punk culture just to show their reaction but then that culture has an even greater grip on them than the culture they're trying to escape and so you see how most of us are living in a kind of cultural headlock we can't move out of it and it would be impossible for us and it is for many people I mean in this street after street in this community for many people to even hear the gospel because it is so alien to the culture to which they are deeply committed they cannot hear it and it's not that they're not nice people and it's not that they're not good people and it's not that they're not living in the 25% of the best people who belong to the culture they live in but that culture has such a headlock on them that they simply cannot hear the gospel it's very very difficult and so this story is written to show you how immersed in cultural belonging most of us are that we are really locked in tight and how would it be possible for a man like

Cornelius ever to hear the gospel of Jesus Christ it seems to me that it is humanly speaking utterly impossible how could you ever break through that wall of Roman culture in order to bring a man to being a disciple of Jesus Christ how could it ever happen how could it ever take place and the same might be said of you and it might be said of many people in our society our culture is so is so impervious I think to the possibility of hearing about Jesus Christ and so are we well then there's another man and that other man is from Jerusalem not from Caesarea he's from Galilee originally and his name is Peter and Peter is one of the apostles and one of the witnesses to the resurrection of Jesus Christ and his life has been badly shaken by that experience and he finds himself traveling across the country now bearing witness to this and having had a very peculiar experience back in just chapter eight of this same thing in which when

King Herod moved in on the Christians in Jerusalem and started to persecute them and took James who was the head of the Christian community in Jerusalem and had his head cut off and threw Peter into prison and Peter was sort of in the tightest security wing of the prison under very close guard and in the night he was released and let out and returned to his own people in quite a miraculous way Herod immediately called for an inquiry had the guards who were in charge of him put to death and went looking for Peter and Peter went to Caesarea and the story about Herod Herod becoming as a god when he went down to Caesarea subsequently was a sequel to that event that his attempt to murder or to put Peter out of the way was frustrated and his own life was forfeited so you see that violent contrast between these two men and Peter went on doing the work that he was called to do and he found himself in

Joppa at the house of one Simon the tanner now in the parish that I was in in Toronto which was called Trinity Behind the Gasworks and other names like that to denote a kind of poverty stricken area it's right down in the sort of by the Don River where the Don River comes into Cherry Beach and Lake Ontario and there was there when I first went there and for a long time after I was there it was just a few blocks away from the church a tannery now a tannery is where raw hides from the slaughterhouse are taken and hung out to dry and the smell from a tannery goes a long way indeed and when the wind came from the southeast you could virtually not breathe outside of Little Trinity Church because of the terrible smell that was carried in from the tannery which was as I say several blocks away so it always intrigues me that to this aristocratic gentleman with his retinue of servants and soldiers that were under his command sending to Joppa to the house of one

Simon the tanner that he was going to the polar opposite of the culture that he belonged to and I'm not sure that Peter could have lived in the house of Simon the tanner even though he traveled from there up to Caesarea that there would still be about him the fact that he had spent the last little while in a tannery and so there's this amazing thing but you see Peter too had had the great problem of being culturally headlocked he could not imagine himself in that situation and God had to prepare him you see religious people tend to get more culturally locked in than anybody else because often their religion serves merely to reinforce their cultural involvement and so that this was true of Peter and Peter was given this special working over by God in order to prepare him to break out of this cultural headlock he was in and to talk to somebody who didn't belong to it and that's a hard thing to do and that's why the sheet was let down with the beasts on it and Peter in a vision was told to rise kill and eat and his whole heart rejected it and said

[23 : 45] Lord I cannot do that my whole life has been training day by day and year by year not to be contaminated by animals like that they are unclean I won't go near them you know and so his antipathy for the Romans which would be built into his culture and the concept of going into a pagan household even though he smelt like a tanner the whole concept is so staggering in terms of cross cultural communication you can hardly have crossed a greater barrier between two cultures than these men had to cross in order for this passage of scripture to be read to us tonight you I think have to see the amazing thing that had happened by the gracious and prevenient work if you want of God the Holy

Spirit to prepare these men to be able to talk to each other and you know I want us to be made very conscious by reading this passage of how culturally impossible it is for us to listen to the very people who probably have the most to say to us and yet we can't hear them because of our cultural because we're locked in well God the Holy Spirit works on that and brings people together and prepares people to hear from one another as he did with these people here so you can see you can see what happened they come together and Cornelius explains the situation and Simon begins a little talk which I think is a wonderful way to start a sermon when he

Peter was so amazed at the situation that he found himself in that he opened his mouth and he said truly I perceive that God shows no partiality I don't know what he would ever have me doing here talking to people like you he must be mistaken I simply shouldn't be here and God is not very well brought up and he hasn't really acquired the values of our culture that he would ever allow me to find myself accepting the hospitality of a pagan actually being in a pagan's house and having the pagans prepared to sit down and listen to him to every word that he said with mouths open with expectation so you can see the wonder of it all when you recognize how God had by the Holy Spirit uniquely prepared this situation for something to happen which culturally and humanly speaking could never happen well that's what that's what that was taking place and that's how this chapter ends and he speaks to this pagan and you can look at this closely to see exactly how he does it where do you start what's the first word you say you know it's very difficult to talk to people of a totally alien culture about the thing which is at the center of your own life and faith extremely difficult you know

I mean some people can do it oh so you're a Muslim oh yeah well I well how do you do it you know it's very very difficult because we mostly learn to communicate within very very restricted cultural boundaries where we live most of our life and once we're beyond them we hardly know what to do and you know it's an amazing thing to me that you know that the black church of Uganda worships the Jew of Palestine that 50 million Chinese worship the Jew of Palestine you know that sophisticated Americans by the thousands and millions perhaps worship the Jew of Palestine it's a very very strange thing what seems to be the cultural neutrality of the person of Jesus

Christ how is it that they can do that and you know occasionally you get people painting pictures of a black Christ figure or an oriental Christ figure but basically the fundamental fact is there that Jesus of Nazareth is culturally not very he belongs somewhere somehow in all sorts of cultures the cultures of the poor perhaps the cultures of small communities they understand but you have to think about that some more anyway Jesus becomes the only topic about which Peter can talk and he says you know the word which he sent to Israel preaching good news of peace by Jesus

[29 : 44] Christ that is God sent this word and that Jesus is Lord of all I'm looking at verse 37 if you want to follow the word which was proclaimed throughout Judea beginning from Galilee after the baptism which John preached so he in a sense just defines the historical setting out of which the person of Jesus comes remember that part of what God the Holy Spirit had done to prepare this Roman centurion for this was that he had become a proselyte of the Jewish faith so the Jewish faith apparently had heard about Jesus and about the ministry of John the Baptist the preaching of Christ that Jesus had come with the Holy Spirit and with power and went about doing good and healing all that were oppressed by the devil for God was with him well anyway he identifies for

Cornelius the man Jesus and says you've heard this you picked this up you know this much about it and you see it's interesting if you want to look at it and realize that what's happening here is that we live in a world that knows something about Jesus Christ they don't know very much and most of us perhaps don't know very much but probably as much as as Peter talks here of of Jesus to Cornelius he goes on in verse 39 and says and we are witnesses to all that he did both in the country of the Jews and in Jerusalem so that's our job we'll tell you what he did and the apostolic witness to the person of Jesus Christ his miracles his feeding his raising the dead his healing the sick the blind the deaf the dumb crippled all that we can tell you about because we were there and we saw it and all that we are told about from the same source as we read the pages of the

New Testament and this person about whom this testimony as to his life and ministry has been given this person they put to death by hanging him on a tree you know now the wonder of this remains the kind of focus of the fact as to why a man who by every culture and in every civilization would have to be recognized as a good man was put to death by hanging him on a tree what is there in human nature that this reaction takes place why was he hung on a tree of course that's the great question about the mystery of our humanity that that's what happened this good man was hung to a tree but

Peter goes on to say that's not the end of the story because God raised him up on the third day and made him manifest not to all the people but to us who were chosen by God as witnesses who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead well so Peter says that our witness does not conclude with telling you the works he did the power he demonstrated the wonders he performed and the ministry he had we're not just telling you that for your encouragement we're telling you that he was hanged to a tree and that God in order to vindicate him had raised him from the dead so that the very person whom you crucified God raised and that's of course been the at the heart of the message of the gospel if we can hear it within our cultural headlock so to speak if we can hear this thing which tears to pieces all the pretensions of our cultural systems you know that we would acknowledge and honor the good and we would be obedient to it and we aspire to it and that's what we long for and Peter says yes and why was he nailed to a tree why does he continue to be nailed to a tree why does he continue to be the man who is despised and rejected why is it that God chose to vindicate him by raising him from the dead well that's that's there that's that's the story that Peter told and he said and we tell you this this is what we've seen we're just telling you this is how it happened and he that is

Jesus this one whom God raised from the dead commanded us that is me Peter and all the apostles and disciples of Jesus to preach to the people and to testify that he is the one ordained by God to be judge of the living and the dead to him all the prophets you see those were the scriptures that attracted Cornelius to the Jewish faith all the prophets bear witness that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name so that the one whom you have crucified God is appointed to be judge interesting isn't it it's in a sense you were caught up in a murder mystery the knife is found in your hands dripping with blood and you are guilty and you are apprehended and you're told that you have to appear before the judge and you say well who is the judge and you are the man you murder he's the judge he is the God appointed judge before whom you have to stand that's that's the story but then it goes on to talk about the verdict of this judge before whom you stand your guilt established beyond any doubt the verdict is all the prophets bear witness to this to everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name his verdict is to forgive you you see that's that's right at the heart of what it's all about the one the one whom you've killed he is the one whom God has appointed judge and it is his purpose to offer to you forgiveness of sins can you receive yet we wrap ourselves up in our culture and simply won't expose ourselves to that possibility we simply won't do it well these people were wonderfully prepared by God to do it it says while Peter was still saying this the Holy Spirit fell on all who heard the word and the believers from among the circumcised who came with Peter were amazed because the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on the Gentiles they heard them speaking in tongues and extolling God they were behaving you would say in a culturally unacceptable way it demonstrated that somehow they had broken free of the culture that was imprisoning them and they suddenly found it was within their heart not to remain in the bonds and imprisonment of their cultural conditioning but to let go and to praise and extol God to be caught up in the worship of God and you you must know how often you go into church and you cringe at the announcement of the next hymn or the next prayer and you say no no

[38 : 32] I can't do that that does not say where I am I find that unacceptable then God God in his grace melts your heart and you find that God gives it to you to praise and extol him and to acknowledge his worship and to break free from the entrapping bonds of your own cultural conditioning and to give yourself to the worship of God from the heart and this company of Jews from Joppa saw this and simply didn't know what to do but were so overwhelmed that they had to agree with Peter and Peter said can anyone forbid water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have and he commanded them to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ and they asked him to remain for some days and Peter went back to Joppa and Cornelius went back to being a Roman centurion back right into the heart of the cultures they belonged to but with something radically different about who it was they believed in and who they belonged to and that's the reality we can't escape from the culture we live in the culture we belong to we can't but we can be not the prisoners of that culture but the prisoners of Jesus Christ in that culture because we know who we belong to and that's liberating work in our hearts and lives of God the Holy Spirit preparing us to hear and to come to believe in Christ
Amen