

The story of Peter and Cornelius is the heart of the book of Acts. It is so important that Luke recounts it no fewer than three times. In Acts 10, he tells us of one Cornelius, a man whom we today might describe as “spiritual but not religious” – which is to say, he was a man of prayer and good works, and a good donor besides, but a Gentile. This Cornelius has a vision, in which he is asked to send to Joppa for a man named Simon Peter, who will bring him a word from the Lord.

At the very same moment, Simon Peter is having a dream of his own – wherein he sees a large white sheet containing all manner of forbidden meat, and voice tells him to get up and eat. Peter demurs, since he has kept kosher his entire life. But the voice insists. Just as Peter is waking up from his afternoon nap, who should appear, but emissaries from Cornelius-the-Gentile’s house urging him to hurry on over.

Peter does so, and we are treated a reprise of the whole story, while Peter and Cornelius tell each other about their respective experiences. It is in this context that the Holy Spirit falls upon Cornelius and his entire household, and they exhibit the same gift of tongues which fell upon the Jewish believers on the day of Pentecost. Peter responds by calling for water, and baptizing the whole lot (which, by the way, is how the Anglican Church has justified the baptism of infants – since it is unthinkable that an extended household such as Cornelius’ would have been without small children). This brings us to the end of Chapter 10.

So today, in Chapter 11 [you must imagine that a few weeks have passed], we learn that Peter is in dutch with the Jewish believers because they have just got word that he has been consorting with heathens, and indeed baptizing them! It was bad enough that these new Christians were not part of the Chosen People by birth. Worse yet, Peter hadn’t even required them to learn anything about Judaism, let alone to be circumcised, before allowing them to receive the baptism of Jesus -- who, after all, was a Jew who preached primarily to Jews. This leads to Peter’s defence of his actions – and sure enough, we hear the whole story of Cornelius’ vision and Peter’s dream for the third time.

Generally speaking, repetition of this magnitude means one of two things. Either the narrator is short on ideas; or the point to be taken is especially important. In this case, we may settle on the latter. Make no mistake. This rupturing of the circle of God’s regard and friendship such that it came to include not just outcasts and sinners, but outcasts and sinners *who didn’t even belong to the family* was absolutely revolutionary. The Jewish People had survived the wilderness, and most especially the Babylonian Exile, by creating non-negotiable parameters defining who belonged, what they believed, how they were to behave, whom they were to marry, what and how they were to eat, and so on – in other words, by making a virtue of *distinctiveness*. This is why Jesus’ flagrant violation of the Sabbath, and various culinary rituals, was so offensive to his fellow Jews. How can you maintain your religious identity if you simply blend in? Or, put the other way, if you allow just anybody to be amongst the “Chosen”?

This was an enormous hurdle for the first Christians, all of whom were Jews first. In fact, the debate over the inclusion of the Gentiles in the Church was the first “big church fight” – and it, as much as anything else, caused the parting of the ways between Judaism and Christianity.

What was the clincher for the Church? It was that the Gentile believers, unformed in the Law and the practices of Judaism, likely ignorant of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, Moses, David, Elijah, and the Prophets, exhibited the very same gifts that the Spirit had poured out on the Jewish believers. Peter, in

his defence, says, "If then God gave them the same gift that he gave us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could hinder God?" Luke says, "When [the apostles and disciples] heard this, they were silenced. And they praised God, saying, "Then God has given even to the Gentiles the repentance that leads to life."

Now, I raise this, because I believe that for the past 150 years, thereabouts, the Church itself has been engaged in debates which are answerable to this fundamental principle of God's desire to welcome all. We have been slow to learn. For example, how we agonized over slavery and racial equality. Sadly, in this country, it was not until our lifetimes that an indigenous bishop was elected in any one of our northern dioceses. Long after society declared that women were "persons," and capable of exercising a vote, the Church fretted over whether girls could be servers, or women could be churchwardens (let alone priests). In just about the same time frame (that is, the 1970s), we finally managed to stop excommunicating people who were divorced, and began admitting to communion people from other Christian denominations. Not until the 1980s were we able to admit children to communion – despite the fact that Jesus himself had some pretty direct comments about the exclusion of little ones from the orbit of his love. And as we all know, the worldwide Anglican Church is engaged right now in a "big fight" of our own, concerning the place of gays, lesbians and others whose sexual orientation is other than heterosexual. And if we can ever get past this one, I predict that the next big theological debate will be about what is called "Open Table" – in other words, whether you really need to be baptized in order to receive communion. The great challenge before us as a Christian Church is whether we can once again "rupture the circle of God's friendship and regard" to include people who simply don't fit the "profile."

And how shall we know whom to embrace? Peter and Cornelius give us the clue. When people exhibit the gifts of the Spirit – love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self control – then we may be assured that God has clothed them in his mercy and favour. To paraphrase the apostles and disciples, "If then God has given them the same gift that he gave us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who are we to hinder God?" Or as the voice in Peter's dream puts it: What God has made clean, we are not to profane.