

The Spirit Falls on The Gentiles

Acts 10 and 11

The whole of the book of Acts, can be summed up in Acts 1:8
It's a fantastic verse.

But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.

So there are three big stories in Acts, which carry the whole book.

The first is the arrival of the Holy Spirit in new power on the day of Pentecost. The Holy Spirit is the great wind that propels all that happens in the book of Acts. Not for nothing has the book been called "The Gospel of the Holy Spirit".

Through the Holy Spirit, we see this witness radiate from Jerusalem, to the next door neighbours in Samaria, and then to the Ends of the Earth.

The second is the conversion of Paul in Acts 9. He it is, more than anyone else, who will get the ends of the Earth bit of this. And what's important about Paul is that he shows that not just the disciples who were present at the start with Jesus, but all disciples have this calling to share the gospel.

The conversion story of Paul is so important, that it is retold on three different occasions throughout the book.

The third great story in Acts, which takes up two chapters in the middle of the book, and which is told in detail on two separate occasions, has in it three conversions.

The first conversion is a Centurion called Cornelius, who is converted along with friends, to be saved by Jesus.

The second conversion is the conversion of Peter who must see that no food is unclean, in order to see that no person is unclean. But as we will come to it, I think this is about food, and it is about more than food.

And the third conversion is about a conversion within the Jerusalem Church to recognise that the first two conversions are of God.

The Conversion of Cornelius

The first conversion is of Cornelius.

We are told that Cornelius – a soldier of the occupying power – so get how disruptive this was, - this was like an enemy agent, he is a man of goodness, who does much for others, and he is someone who prays.

And as he's praying, he is told in a vision to send for Peter, and Peter comes to his house in Caesarea. And Peter preaches what in the New Testament sense is the gospel – about the inbreaking of God in the person of Jesus into the life of the world – of the way that Jesus preached peace – he went out about doing good, healing all who were oppressed by the devil, that he was put to death on a tree and raised on the third day, he is to be preached as the one who is the judge of the living and the dead, and that everyone who believes in him will have forgiveness of sins.

That is the whole of the gospel – sometimes we reduce it to one of those parts – in the more progressive parts of the Church, to the inbreaking of God only, to other parts, the forgiveness of sins, as if everything before is a warm up act – it's everything. That's the gospel. The Good News, of the coming into the world of Jesus, his dying and resurrection, and all the implications for us who believe. And that this is done without partiality – it is for all people.

We don't even know the point at which Cornelius is converted. All we are told is that whilst Peter is saying this, the Holy Spirit falls on all who are there, speaking in tongues, extolling God, and they are baptised.

So that is the conversation of Cornelius. Which is described as the gift of the mind-change that leads to life.

Conversion of Peter

Lets talk about the Conversion of Peter.

Now you might be thinking that Peter was already converted.

Probably when he confessed Jesus as Lord

Or probably when he reinstated by Jesus on the Beach.

But what is interesting is that conversion is not a biblical word, but if anything it describes the radical shifts that people undergo through the Holy Spirit, and this too is conversion.

In fact the way that the New Testament uses the word saved encapsulates this – sometimes it means saved as in brought from death to life in terms of forgiveness, sometimes it means a process of transformation, sometimes it means the salvation that happens at the end of all things.

By grace you have been saved – Eph 2:5

To us who are being saved – 1 Cor 1:18

Will we be saved by his life – Romans 5:9

Being saved is an ongoing process. Being converted contains many different conversions.

And this is one of the occasions on which Peter is deeply changed, converted

Now let's look at this incident, which happens at a house which is still reputedly there to this day – the house of Simon the Tanner.

Peter is complaining that he is hungry, and so he goes up to the roof to pray whilst everyone else sorts out lunch. It's kind of interesting the guests' privileges he is able to pull, and also the reference to hunger is interesting given that what is about to happen, is on one level, all about food.

Now we are told that in Acts 10:10 Peter was praying and fell into a "trance".

Now the word Trance translates a Greek word, which is EkStasis.

Stasis which is where he you stand – it is the same root of a word, its from where we get words like static and stasis.

You are standing in one place, and then you are uprooted in your thought, your understanding, your sense of where your body is.

And Ek, means out of.

Profoundly uprooted.

It is interesting to note how uncomfortable people are with that thought, because you would think there was a perfectly good English word that you could use for this Greek word "ekstasis".

But NIV – Trance , NLT, RSV

CEV – Visionary Experience,

KJV Trance

Message – Trance

It's only some of the more niche translations which are prepared to grasp the nettle, rise to the challenge.

Darby Translation – An Ecstasy came upon him

Douay- Rheims – There came upon him an ecstasy of mind.

And this translation reflects a deep unease – but we forget that these kind of physically uprooting experiences, these bodily experiences, are how people are changed – whether, Peter, or Paul, or Abraham, or Joseph – both of them

There comes a point where we are no longer changed by the logical mind. It is the experience of God changing us, with visions with dreams, when we are ripped out of the place where we are standing and in control, that is where we are changed.

Sometimes the mind has to do the work, but sometimes it's the heart, it's the soul, it's the whole self, that does the discernment, and it is the mind which has to catch up – in Anselm's famous definition of theology – Faith seeking understanding.

And then look at what happens, this vessel like a sheet, it's otherworldly, and it contains all these animals.

Now I used to think that it was the unclean animals only, but it's the clean and the unclean, they are all together, and that's the point.

All one – there are cows, and the lambs, which you can eat, and the pigs which are unclean

The horse and the camel, and the lion and the puma
There are the reptiles. The Crocodile, the snake,

The trout and the salmon and the prawn – the sea creatures

And here are a set of rules – and there are divided views about the logic for these
For some this is about health, that which is dirty – and you sense that this is in anything that crawls on the earth
But for some it is about symbol. We just need some symbols that say we are different.

Amongst the rules, I think is against a sense of mixing – the Old Testament rules really don't like things that are mixed up, that aren't quite one thing or another.

If an animal chews the cud or has divided hooves, it must have both – you can't have a mixture. The pig – it has divided hooves, but doesn't chew the cud – neither the rock badger.

Or a bird, that eats seeds, but not one that eats meat

Or anything that is in the sea that has fins, and scales, but not anything with a shell.

It is like – we like the things that know what they are, but things that mess with the categories – those are unclean.

Anthropologists have a word for this – the word is liminal, anything that sits between categories.

In a conflict situation, people attack the liminal, they only want things which are polarised, which are clean.

So in Northern Ireland, you could either be Protestant or Catholic,

But if you blurred the lines
If you were a Protestant who married a Catholic
Or a Catholic who worked for the Police

Then you were in the greatest danger.

There is another word for liminal, the word is messy.

And systems of rules with Peter – including his scriptures, his own history, is that he has kept out the messy and he feels good about it.

And then what is the voice that tells him to eat what is messy, to contaminate himself,
It is God's very own voice,
And Peter says "Certainly not". I love the fact that here he is arguing with God for not being God enough.
Peter is adopting the posture of moral hygiene with God.

And then a second time – anything which God has made clean, do not declare unclean.

At which point Peter would be very entitled to open up Leviticus – chapter 11, and tell God that it wasn't him Peter who declared these unclean, it was God.

And it is not just the scriptures, here, it is conditioning, it is shaping, it is everything that Peter has ever lived with, which has told him that this is wrong.

Because around the scriptures a whole lot has accumulated – that you cannot go into the house, you cannot eat with the person; and sometimes when we teach these passages we say the complaint is against the accumulated tradition, but note here that what is the root scriptural tradition. That is what the Spirit does here.

But more than that, there is another attitude that has come with this.

Not only the animals are unclean
But the people who eat the animals are unclean.

So Peter in eating these risks a betrayal of his upbringing, a betrayal of the scriptures, a revulsion with himself, if he eats these.
And even God himself will not persuade him otherwise.

But God says I have declared these foods clean.

There was maybe a word of Jesus, but Peter seems to have completely forgotten this.
Or there could be Genesis where God sees that everything is good.

There is the possibility that scriptures are no longer applied,
Or that God has changed.

This moment brings us into some very troubling questions, which is exactly why Peter is troubled, he is ecstatic, he is out of place.

And I would go so far as to say that if this passage doesn't trouble us, disturb us, doesn't make us ecstatic, then we have not read it closely enough.

Remember what Jesus said – the Spirit blows where it wills – and we fear this, we fear the Spirit;

We say it is messy, liminal, anarchy, chaos.

I've got two other words – beautiful and good.

Something has changed, and Peter is ripped out of this.

- And the voice has to speak three times to get Peter to change

So Peter goes to Cornelius house, and he speaks to them with his speech which is the gospel, but look how it begins with Peter's new understanding,

"I now understand that God shows not partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him"

Do you see that Peter has now moved from practice to people
That this isn't just about food, this is about people.

Because in any ruled environment – and my old practical theology Professor Heather Walton once stated after I had done an anthropological field exercise sat in a pub in Byres Road in Glasgow – every environment is a ruled environment; and wherever you have rules, the best part of having rules, is looking down on the people who don't stick to the rules.

Because in any ruled environment, you *need* the people who don't keep the rules
And you need to know that these people are deficient.

We humans we create these hierarchies – whether in a pub, or dog walkers, or covid, or parking, or human sexuality, or ethnicity, or gender,
Rules,
And where the rules are, there is purity, and hierarchy, and difference, and superiority and on the other side shame, inferiority, deep deep self-loathing.

Because here's another thing about the ruled environments, the hierarchies,
They kill the people at the bottom
But they also kill the people at the top.

Because deep inside of them, they know they themselves don't escape the judgement and the shame, and so they work all the more furiously to dump it onto those beneath them.

And if you can say that God is behind this rule system, you can amplify all those things yet further.

And you need an ecstasy to rip you out
And a dream
And a vision

But the point of real declaration for Peter actually happens with the actual people
And real actual people who are outside the category
That's the moment, when these people stop being theoretical
That's the moment you change.

All of these things are what change you.

The Conversion of the Community

Now if the only two people that needed converted in this exchange were Cornelius, and the Peter, then the story could end at the end of the chapter 10.

But there is another conversion that is required here, the conversion of the community.

Peter arrives back in Jerusalem, and people have heard that the Gentiles had accepted the word of God. Everything seems okay. But I wonder if there is a don't ask/don't tell thing going on here.

So it takes a party, called the Circumcision Party, a faction within the disciples in Jerusalem, a hard core party, to start raising a question, a discension, a questioning of Peter himself.

How do you imagine the Circumcision party? I think that party is an ironic word to use, because I think the last place you would expect to see these people would be a party...

Just imagine them, and they hear about Peter.

They do not like this one bit, that the gospel means that the Gentiles stay as they are, that the rules are disputed, and they have good scriptural and deep cultural reasons for thinking this.

Now what is interesting is that Peter, when he hears this, does not explode in rage.

The old Peter, the impetuous Peter of old, would have erupted at these people, calling into question his credentials, he could have called them racist, or bigots; intolerant bigots, closet racists, unable to get over their privilege.

I never like the sound of this circumcision party, they sound so convinced of themselves, but Peter recognises that they are part of the body of Christ, and so we are told very specifically that he takes them through the story "Step by step".

Because he recognises that the same culture conditioning, the same scriptures, the same Moses story that has shaped him has also shaped them – and that they have found a way of accommodating the Jesus story to their old story. They have found a compromise, that so far works. They are Jesus followers, but they keep the circumcision.

They are hanging on in there with the Church.

They are worried about where this is leading.

And they are worried because they know that when the people abandon the law, God abandons the people.

So he tells them the story, and just so that we get it too, Luke repeats all the same details from chapter 11, there are very slight changes.

When Luke repeats a story he is signalling to us “THIS IS AN IMPORTANT STORY”

He ends with this great line – verse “The Holy Spirit fell upon us, just as it had upon us at the beginning”.

It was when they saw the Spirit move, that they knew that they had to move as well.

That was how the Church was converted.

Now the interesting thing is that Peter would one day lapse back
We know that from Galatians

That the Church would one day lapse back – we know that From Galatians and Acts

But I think that God will keep converting
And God will keep sending his Spirit

So may the Lord convert us,
May God send his Spirit

To convert the Corneliuses
To convert the Peters
To convert our whole community

AMEN