

Study 4 20/2/14

Christ, Lord of the Gentiles

Acts 10:34-43

The speech of Peter to the household of centurion Cornelius marks the entry of the gospel to the Gentiles. Paul has been told to take the gospel to them (9:15) but this is still to happen. The space given to this incident and the reporting of it in *Acts* tell us that it is a truth we need to learn. The detail Peter gives about the change this event brought to him also shows how the gospel remakes those who declare it.

When Paul tells us about his particular ministry to bring the gospel to Gentiles (Eph. 2:11-22; 3:4-12), he is awed with its magnificence. Peace is addressed to all nations on identical terms, creating one household for God. He is talking about the 'unfathomable riches of Christ', and a community through which God's wisdom is on display to the whole creation.

We are all sectarian by nature, finding moral security in our own community and the Lord of the church calls us to participate in his unfathomable riches with a view to God's new people of God (e.g. John 20:23). He wants us to incarnate the wideness of his grace in our own affections and actions, 'becoming all things to all people' (1 Cor. 9:22). The church is regularly warned against partiality (Rom. 2:11; Eph. 6:9; Col. 3:25; James 2:1; 1 Pet. 1:17).

Cornelius has known the religion of Rome but is now a God-fearer, accepting the revelation given to Israel and keeping their moral law. He is godly, generous and obedient according to the angel who visits him. We could say he knows Israel's law but knows it as Israel is intended to know it, as a wonderful gift, even while it awakens the need for grace. God opens his mind through a vision, directing him specifically to a servant of Christ some 50 kilometres away.

Meanwhile, God must also open the heart and mind of Peter to the fact of the gospel coming to Gentiles. God spoke to Israel, and expected them to keep this faith intact, not mixing it with the teaching of other nations. This may have led to them being more exclusive than they needed to be (not eating food offered to idols now meant not eating with Gentiles) but Peter's conscience is highly attuned to this separation from Gentiles and only the Lord can tell him what is now clean and unclean. He is learning that God's elect now includes Gentiles.

Jesus has shown that ceremony cannot secure cleansing and that all foods are effectively 'clean' (Mark 7:1-19; c.f. Acts 13:39) but this needs to be worked out now in the setting of Gentiles coming to Christ. It needs to be worked out again when Peter forgets this (Gal. 2:11-14), and yet again every time we forget that our salvation is a work of grace and not the practice of our religion or culture.

The Spirit expressly tells Peter to travel with the centurion's servants. When Peter arrives at the home of Cornelius, the centurion receives him humbly. Like the earlier centurion, he understands that the messenger is commanded by God to say what he does. Peter understands that they are all in the presence of God.

The speech (vv. 36-43)

How is the gospel communicated to a Gentile? Peter's message guides the way.

God regards all nations alike (v. 34). Israel already knows God shows no partiality (Deut. 10:17) and they were to show no partiality with one another either. But now, other nations are involved. Jonah had been shown that God would receive Gentiles if they repented so the groundwork was there but not the living dynamism of being one people together (Eph. 2:11-22). Israel is God's chosen people, but this is a calling to *be* such a people, so other nations will know the Lord, not so Israel can gloat over lesser peoples. His choosing them is not partiality. Any one who fears him...is acceptable to God' (v. 35). Paul says it has always been the case that those who seek God will receive his favour (Rom. 2:11) and Peter is finding the truth of this here.

While the Spirit has brought about the setting for this proclamation, the power of God is the gospel, not in the sociality of those brought together, so Peter does the same with these Gentiles as he has done with Jews.

Gods' gift of peace to humanity was announced to Israel by their prophets (e.g. Isa. 52:7), and by angels at the birth of Jesus (Luke 2:14). But Jesus announced peace at his resurrection (John 20:19). This Jesus is not only Israel's Christ; he is Lord of all. His message applies to all.

Peter then follows the order of Mark's Gospel, noting that Cornelius would be familiar with these facts: John the Baptist announced Israel's Messiah; this Jesus of Nazareth did many good deeds by the power of the Holy Spirit—God was with him and Satan's territory was challenged; the apostles saw these things and can vouch for them; the Jews had him crucified but God raised him from the dead—which the apostles can attest because they were chosen to see him, to eat and drink with him.

Jesus himself commanded this good news of Christ's victory over death be announced to 'the people', 'all nations' in fact. He says they were also to attest that Jesus is appointed to judge the living and the dead. No commissioning actually includes this but it was taught by Jesus and affirmed at his trial. Paul says his resurrection is the assurance of this (Acts 17:30-31).

Peter could have cited Jesus regarding the command to announce forgiveness (Matt. 24:14; John 20:23) but he is moving in new territory and broadens the base of his authority to the prophecies Jesus fulfilled—all of them say that forgiveness will be available to all nations (e.g. 2 Chron. 6:21, 32-33; Isa. 56:6-7).

The sequel

If the people at Pentecost could not wait for the end of Peter's message, the Holy Spirit here doesn't wait for Peter to work out what to do after telling them they can be forgiven. As noted earlier, the form in which forgiveness is conveyed is in the coming of the Spirit and he comes of his own accord to give indisputable proof that this is the purpose of God and not to be interpreted or legislated by the church.

These Gentiles speak in tongues as the apostles did at Pentecost (the likeness is to the apostles rather than to those who believed through their preaching); they extol God as they did at Pentecost. The signs are unmistakable; the Gentiles are joined to the people of God by God himself. The Lord is adding to his church those who are being saved.

The church in the person of Peter adds its seal to what God has done, the proper role for the church, and baptizes those who believe. They now know what it means to go into all the world...baptising in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.