

Sermon for Hinde Street Methodist Church  
Sunday 10<sup>th</sup> May 10am Service

Acts 10.44-48

John 15.9-17

One of the dilemmas the early church faced was, whether or not those who wanted to follow Jesus needed to become Jews, or whether they could come just as they were. The issue developed over several decades. As Paul's preaching across the Roman Empire attracted many people with no connection to the Jewish faith. The Jerusalem based leaders – which included Peter – struggled to remain part of the Jewish community at the same time as the Jewish community was reasserting its Jewish identity. Faced with developments that pulled against each other, Jesus' followers struggled to respond, and it was a struggle because issues of table fellowship and sharing communion needed to be resolved. In this situation Peter's experience of Cornelius' baptism in the spirit was powerful. The story is often called the Conversion of Cornelius. But I think it's more accurately called "Peter's conversion" since it was their baptism in the spirit that convinced him that the Gentiles must be embraced as they were. Through this event, he believed that God was showing him that even though Jesus had largely confined his preaching to the Jews, his message was for all. No one is excluded. All people are children of God. Yet this is not what many people experience in today's world. Their experience is that they are not welcome. They feel excluded because things like their nationality, skin colour, or sexuality, the poverty of their nation or community, a lack of education or a home places them apart from the majority. And sadly, many experience the same in the church too, so they remain quiet or they stay away.

The story of Cornelius and his family is important, because it's the story of a conversion, through which the excluded become included. I'm struck by the astonishment of the Jewish Christians. Luke says, *"The circumcised believers who had come with Peter were astounded that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on the Gentiles..."* You can almost hear them thinking "How can this be?" Maybe even, "How dare God?! We are the chosen people. We are different. We are superior. We have a rich history and a dynamic culture. These Gentiles are nothing. Nothing but dogs..." Then, after Peter has spoken, reminding them that they've seen the Gentiles *"speaking in tongues and extolling God"*, they relent. I'm sure that in real life, their conversion took longer than a sentence, but eventually they recognize that it is God's desire that even Gentiles can become full members of Christ's body.

But what does this mean for us now? It's easy to speak about including people in. It's much harder to do. And we can easily find ourselves in the same place as the Jewish Christians who witnessed Cornelius' baptism - struggling with our desire to include - and yet also recognizing that the implications of the desire to be inclusive – are challenging. If we can acknowledge that it isn't easy we've taken the first step of welcoming others. But some can't. And I suspect those who can't, find it difficult, because those who are different challenge us to change. They disrupt our comfortable lives. They ask questions about why we do things as we do them. And they have their own ideas about how things might be better. They ask to be given space, to be listened to, to share in decision-making and most of us find that very difficult. Delroy Hall, a bishop in the Church of God of Prophecy, say this.

*“We acknowledge the gospel is for all, but then we hit a brick wall when the most unlikely of individuals walks through our church doors, admits their need of a saviour and then wants to join fellowship with us ... disrupting our nice holy huddle. [But] God wants humanity to follow Jesus, [and] to follow means to be united with, or to move in the same direction. It suggests something that is fluid and not static. There is movement, there is a change, we follow, we alter, we adapt to the lifestyle and the mind-set of the one we are following. And following calls for commitment.”*

Commitment costs. It costs those who are in. And it also costs those who join. Because it asks people who are different to go on our journey together, to talk about the things we have different views on, and to develop new ways of doing things that suit everyone – while still remaining open to further change. Because it’s hard, it’s ever so easy to get stuck in a place where the newcomers remain on the edge. Either refusing to take on responsibility or being excluded from power. When that happens, differences, resentments and prejudices abound in churches, communities and nations. They’re where Peter was before he saw the vision that changed him. Sure that God would not ask him to associate with anyone he believed was unclean.

We cannot afford to go there. And we cannot afford to, not simply because it would make us poorer, but because the life God has given us is another one. It is a life of friends, living in community with each other, intertwined in relationships that bring life and fruitful joy. The image of God, Jesus and the disciples as a vine is one of my favourites. And Jesus develops it as he talks about his followers becoming “friends” who will lay down their lives for each other. This isn’t a hierarchical picture of the church or the world, it’s one in which all are equals, in which there is mutual giving and receiving and sharing as power and resources are shared in love. And it both leads to, and depends on, the excluded being included in. For when they are, the way we relate to each other will change, not just in church but in every part of our lives.

Today’s readings, invite us to consider how those on the margins of nations, communities or church are included in. Not just in theory, but also, in practice. How do we treat people from different races, nationalities and religions, especially those who are newcomers in our midst? They include residents of this country, asylum seekers, economic migrants and illegal immigrants. Many belong to churches. People not born in Britain now make up the largest number of worshippers on a Sunday morning in London, and more Moslems pray at the Mosque on Friday, than Christians on Sunday. The election campaign we’ve just been part of, and the policies of the party now in power, leads me to believe that how we relate to these we call “them” is a question that’s going to receive even more air time in the coming months than it has in the past months and years. And Christians need to be involved in the debate. We can see these others as a threat. Or we can be welcoming, explore each other’s worlds and faiths, and allow ourselves to be challenged as Peter was by Cornelius and his family. Except that I don’t think that the followers of Jesus actually have a choice about this, if we are to be true to him in his life, death, and resurrection. I’m convinced we’re called to take the journey to openness which is journey of love. And it’s why I’m delighted Hinde Street has decided to belong to the Inclusive Church network. Its statement affirms what we believe. *“We believe in inclusive Church – church which does not discriminate, on any level, on grounds of economic power, gender, mental health, physical ability, race or sexuality. We believe in Church which welcomes and serves all people in the*

*name of Jesus Christ; which is scripturally faithful; which seeks to proclaim the Gospel afresh for each generation; and which, in the power of the Holy Spirit, allows all people to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Jesus Christ.”* When the Church Council agreed to join up, we acknowledged that we are not there yet, and that there is much we have to do in the church. But I always want us to recognize that this is not just about what we do “in church”. This statement also invites us to reflect on how we live, and how we make it a reality, as we relate to other people and to God’s wider world, in our everyday lives. How we respond, is as important as the early Church’s response to Cornelius and his family and the question for all of us is, will we allow the Spirit of God to change us? Amen.

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