

## THE INVITATION OF ALL – ACTS 10 - 11:1-18

Have you ever walked into situation where you are incredibly uncomfortable? Where you know you are outside of accepted practice or norm or where you feel bereft of knowledge of what to do and say? Even where you perhaps face allegation of ignorance or disregard for cultural understanding?

We start to see some of this in motion as we read the story of Peter and Cornelius in Acts 10-11, which unpacks a story that is something of a turning point for the believers of the day and impacts the Church in its growth.

Under the old covenant with Abraham, God had given laws to the Israelites which set them apart: certain rituals, what they ate and who they associated with. This was about being true to the law, to their own culture and to the special God-given covenant that was unique to them. It was thus accepted that to be a believer you either had to be, or to become Jewish.

Cornelius was a respected God-fearing, uncircumcised Jew, thus was seen as a Gentile. He is noticed by God and is instructed to send for Peter. Whilst messengers are en route to find him, Peter is having his own experience that challenges his understanding and potential application of the Jewish laws. In his vision, the animals that under the law are deemed unclean, are presented before Peter and God says, 'consume them'. As a law-abiding Jew, Peter refuses. And yet God says, 'don't call unclean what I call clean'. 3 times the vision is shared with Peter before the messengers arrive.

Only on returning to Cornelius and hearing his side of the story, does the penny seem to drop for Peter, and he realises that the vision he has had is not in fact about the food itself but rather God clearly directing that the message of Jesus be shared with all people not just the Jews. Acts 10:34-35: *I now realise how true it is that God does not show favouritism but accepts from every nation, the one who fears him, and does what is right.*

As the message of Jesus is shared and in confirmation, the Holy Spirit falls on the place just as it did at Pentecost with the Jewish believers and Cornelius' entire household believes. In that moment barriers, assumptions and expectations of who is worthy to hear and to receive salvation, who's in and who's out, are being broken down.

As Luke continues his account, he does something of a 'but wait there's more!' moment. 'This isn't over -there is more you need to hear, listeners!' And Acts 11 moves us into part 2 where Peter continues on from Caesarea and by the time he gets back to Jerusalem, the story of what happened there has already filtered through.

Peter is brought to account by fellow Jewish believers, with their accusation focused on broken laws and shameful actions.

India has a caste system which, while technically was abolished in 1950, in reality is very much alive and well. After thousands of years of ingrained dos and don'ts on how people are divided, classed and treated, such practices passed from generation to generation don't just go away. Jobs and places of living, even surnames identify you to a particular caste. There are societal, political, economic, educational, and vocational implications attached to each caste and the groups generally don't mix, at least not willingly.

Likewise, the Jewish laws and assumptions and treatment of others were ingrained throughout society and any perceived challenge of these, was severely frowned upon. Associating with Gentiles was just not the 'done thing'. They were the 'outsiders and non-chosen'.

Think of our current day contexts: what's not the 'done thing' today? Who we mix with, where we choose to live, who we socialise with, who is appropriate for certain roles etc. Why do we make those decisions? The assumptions, attitudes, expectations we have are often the result of years of ingrained-ness, realised or not. Even the way we 'do' and 'be' Church can be from years of tradition and expectation. At the extreme end, we can get so bound up in 'the right expectations', that we unknowingly push Jesus, the very centre and reason for our faith, out of it all!

Our assumptions are often based on not knowing any different. We simply don't stop to consider an alternative. Therefore, it's not that surprising that in our Acts story, other Jewish believers were concerned about what Peter had done – they didn't know anything else. Yet God used the very laws and ingrained expectations they had, to challenge them. Peter himself had been transformed, so being confronted with this accusation, we could surmise that



Peter knew he had to share in a way that the lights would go on for his accusers too.

In response Peter simply:

1. Outlines the facts of the experience. The Message translation puts it: *So Peter, starting at the beginning laid it out for them, step by step.*
2. Highlights that there were 6 Jewish believers as witnesses. It becomes clear to the accusers that Peter isn't making up this experience.
3. Recalls the words of Jesus and the experience that they all knew. *I remembered in that moment what the Lord had said to us before he left us - that John baptised with water but that we would be baptised with the Holy Spirit. And that's exactly what happened to us, right on that day at Pentecost.* The Gentile believers were no longer separated by experience.
4. Notes this is God's work, gift and choice to include all. Peter hadn't made this decision. *So if God gave them the same gift, he gave to us who believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I to think that I could stand in God's way?*

Peter has been personally convicted and with his testimony, the accusers have an ah ha! moment. They cease their objections, fall silent, do a 180 about-face and praise God too, acknowledging that the Gentiles have God's favour as well. The barriers that had been up, come down.

It's not for the Church to predict or decide who God wants in or out. For God moves beyond and disrupts the boundaries we humans create.

Revelation 7:9: *After this I looked, and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and before the Lamb.*

Imagine that scene - all people, all nations standing before the throne – not just the ones we want or are the same as us! That has surely got to be something spectacular.

## REFLECTION + DISCUSSION

1. How do we respond when God leads us to something or someone that is outside our norm or comfort zone?
2. What is God inviting us to be part of, that might require a willingness on our part to see with new eyes - within the church context and/or beyond?
3. Who might we be shutting off and out of God's message, even unintentionally, by our expectations, attitudes, behaviours and assumptions? Who is 'in' and who is 'out' and why do we believe that?
4. How much do we criticise and critique others? 'It's not what I would have done/you shouldn't have done that/etc.'.
5. What does taking time to understand another's context look like and what therefore are the implications?



CENTRAL BAPTIST

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