



THE TABLE EXTENDED

Sunday 8 May 2022

SERMON TRANSCRIPT

We are in a series called 'Extending the Table'. Last fortnight we looked at Peter and the incredible, necessary conversation he needed to have with Jesus, or that Jesus needed to have with him. Today we're looking at another very significant moment in Peter's life to see what we can learn and what encourages us about how we can extend the table in our lives as well. My hope this term is that we are moved by the Holy Spirit to see our lives as called to embody God's invitation to the table and to embrace those that Jesus is embracing.

Acts 10 is the longest most detailed narrative that Luke writes in the book of Acts. It's the longest, single story. It goes across Acts 10 and Acts 11. I think that if Luke is going to put so much detail and so much air time into this, then there must be something really significant about it for us to learn today.

This is the story of two households. It's the story of a Gentile household and the story of a Jewish household. Peter and his companions are staying in Joppa, and Cornelius and his household are about 50km away living in Caesarea. Fifty-kilometres is a decent distance when you are travelling by foot. But culturally and socially the distance is far far greater. These are people from different worlds: Peter is a devout Jew (albeit, one who believed the Messiah has come) and Cornelius is a Roman Centurion from the pagan gentile world abhorred by Israel. We will get to that contrast soon...

However, the thing they both have in common is a God who wants to speak to them and radically change both their lives. And this happens in three movements:

1. The Preparation (Acts 10:1-33)
2. The Proclamation (Acts 10:34-43)
3. The Transformation (Acts 10:44-48)

Firstly, the **preparation**. So there are two main characters and there is a divine set up required for both. Both need preparation for what God wants to do in their lives. God reaches out to both men in a vision.

Cornelius' Preparation (Acts 10:1-8):

God had already begun this before the vision: "*He and all his family were devout and God-fearing; he gave generously to those in need and prayed to God regularly.*" (Acts 10:2)

Although a Roman (you know, the empire that is militarily occupying Israel), Cornelius was a God-fearer. This is a category of people. From your typical Israelite perspective there were 4 kinds of people:

1. Devout Jews - culturally and religiously exclusive, refusing to associate with non-Jews.
2. Proselytes - a unique category of non-Jews who fully convert to Judaism by applying the Torah to their lives, including diet and circumcision and baptism (and, to a devout Jew, these people were considered 'Israelites').
3. Gentiles - polytheistic, pagan, alien, "just leave them alone, they are far from God."
4. God-fearers - Gentiles who remain culturally diverse but morally and doctrinally devout. They eat what they like and don't get circumcised.

So God has already begun to work in Cornelius: he is devout, he is living according to the moral law of Judaism, he is already reaching out for God, faith is already stirring, he is longing for more, but he does not know Jesus nor the Good News that can save him. Gosh a lot of people today are like this! Great people - spiritual but not religious, open to God, they look pretty moral... but don't personally know Jesus.

So at 3pm one afternoon, the time of prayer, God dispatches an Angel with specific instructions to send some men to find Simon Peter - and, very importantly, Cornelius obeys by sending those men.

Peter's Preparation (Acts 10:9-33)

God has been preparing Peter too - you could say for years - but let me rewind about 7 years to Acts 2. What happens there in that upper room? Pentecost. The Holy Spirit fills them and they speak in the languages of all the surrounding nations. These Galileans (the 'bogans' of Israel) had been filled with the capacity to speak sophisticated languages, not their own culture, the languages of the people they didn't associate with. And the question the onlookers ask is, "What does this mean?" And that question echoes through the book of Acts...

That was a big life-changing moment but the early church had not worked out all the

implications yet of what this means. Seven years later to Acts 10, not much has changed really. The world of the early church is highly segregated, as I described. Peter and the Apostles weren't Christians as we think. They still went to the temple to pray and worship, they observed the customs and religious festivals, they observed the Levitical laws on who and what was clean and unclean, they only ate approved foods, and they remained segregated from Gentiles. A Jew would never enter a Gentile home because the home would make them unclean, as would the food. If you go back and read Leviticus 11, the Torah is highly prescriptive on food and preparation. Camels, horses, pigs, dogs, anything that lives in water that doesn't have fins or scales, eagles and owls, rats, lizards, snakes, and anything that crawls on the ground were all definitely off the menu... And to be honest, I'm pretty ok with not eating most of these things!

But how strong is this for Peter and the Apostles? Can you imagine reinforcing a behaviour and a mindset of cultural exclusivity for 500 years? Twenty generations of entrenched thinking, telling you God said don't touch and don't associate with Gentile people... It goes beyond law - it's almost genetic. Can you see how this might be a problem if God wants the whole world to be invited to the table? For centuries God has primarily revealed Himself through a mono-cultural framework.

So the preparation for Peter began years before, but God needs to accelerate and offend Peter's thinking. So he has this vision one afternoon, just before lunch. Peter is praying. He starts to doze off (which makes me feel a whole lot better) and in that half-asleep-half-awake state he has a shocking vision or semi-awake dream of all kinds of four-footed animals, as well as reptiles and birds: *"Then a voice told him, 'Get up, Peter. Kill and eat.' 'Surely not, Lord!' Peter replied. 'I have never eaten anything impure or unclean.' The voice spoke to him a second time, 'Do not call anything impure that God has made clean.'"* (Acts 10:13-15)

This is a disturbing vision, so far out of Peter's theological and cultural box. Don't call anything impure that God has made clean? Everything in a Gentile world was impure! Not just the camels and the owls! And this vision points to a world that God declares is open for reaching? No more labels, no more categories, no more no-go people - the Gospel is for all!

While Peter is pondering all this, Cornelius' men arrive and Peter does the next most important thing. He obeys the prompting of the Spirit and he goes with them. I love that Peter sets out the next morning to walk 50km from Joppa to Caesarea to make himself unclean in the eyes of his culture, to bring Good News to people he has never met so that they may be saved and become disciples.

So that is the preparation. Then there is the **proclamation** (Acts 10:34-43):
"Then Peter began to speak: '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. You know the message God sent to the people of Israel, announcing the good news of peace through Jesus Christ, who is Lord of all. You know what has happened throughout the province of Judea, beginning in Galilee after the baptism that John preached - how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and power, and how he went around doing good and healing all who were under the power of the devil, because God was with him. "We are witnesses of everything he did in the country of the Jews and in Jerusalem. They killed him by hanging him on a cross, but God raised him from the dead on the third day and caused him to be seen. He was not seen by all the people, but by witnesses whom God had already chosen - by us who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead. He commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he is the one whom God appointed as judge of the living and the dead. All the prophets testify about him that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name."

Peter shares the message God sent to the people of Israel, announcing the Good News of peace through Jesus Christ, who is Lord of all.

He shares the core elements: the life death, resurrection, and reign of Jesus. And he adds, "*All the prophets testify about Him that everyone who believes in Him receives forgiveness of sins through His name.*" The Good News most certainly has more movements to it when you span Genesis to Revelation, but it's not ever less than this and this is non-negotiable in salvation. When you remove the life, death, and resurrection with all their implications from the Gospel, you have moralistic self-help. It is the Gospel of Jesus that saves, not by being a God-fearer, or a moral or good person. Peter doesn't say, "I am here to announce to you that those of you who fear God and do right are already forgiven." He says, "*I am here so that you may hear the Gospel and receive forgiveness in the name of Christ by believing in Him.*" Friends, let's not mix up salvation with looking moral or being a good person. People need to hear who Jesus is and what Jesus has done and put their trust in Him otherwise they are not yet saved.

Can I add: something happens when you proclaim the Gospel to others. You proclaim it to yourself too. Every time I preach to you, do you know I'm preaching to myself too. I think God is preaching to Peter as he preaches to the Gentiles, and He is shifting something in Peter's heart.

Finally, there is the **transformation** (Acts 10:44-48):

"While Peter was still speaking these words, the Holy Spirit came on all who heard the message. The circumcised believers who had come with Peter were astonished that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on Gentiles. For they heard them speaking in tongues and praising God."

While Peter is speaking it gets a little crazy during the sermon. They hear the message and,

boom, the Holy Spirit takes it from here! They start speaking in tongues and praising God. Salvation has come! There is no salvation without being drawn by the Father, being forgiven through the Son, and being filled with the Holy Spirit. It may look different for different people, but it always looks like transformation and worship. Our lives are changed when God comes into our lives and the praise of our life shifts to worship Him above all other loves and idols...

But the transformation is not just for Cornelius and his household – it's for Peter too: *"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."* (Acts 10:34)

Then Peter said, *"Surely no one can stand in the way of their being baptised with water. They have received the Holy Spirit just as we have."* So he ordered that they be baptised in the name of Jesus Christ. Then they asked Peter to stay with them for a few days." (Acts 10:47-48)

This really is a wonderful challenge today to mission cross-culturally, or even locally, or even just within our church. We can all be stuck in our own personal reality with an exclusion zone around us – clean and unclean, friends and strangers, our circle and those outside... We form these views for many reasons: our fears, our history, our culture, our personality, our biases just like Peter had...

And God needs to challenge them in us.

In fact, let's not lose the significance that although God used Peter to bring salvation to Cornelius and his household, God also used Cornelius to bring something so meaningful and life-changing to Peter too. Those we minister to have a way of ministering to us. Those we seek to help have a way of helping us. We think we have the spiritual high ground, but we have to be so careful to not become arrogant – we have much to learn from others too. We are sent, but we are also recipients.

So, like Peter, we too are called to humbly open our hearts and extend the table of our lives to one another, across the aisle of church, across the hall at work, across the street at home. Or maybe for some it's across cultural or geographical lines. But there is no avoiding the reality that if you are genuinely following the way of Jesus you are a sent one: sent into contexts that in some way are outside your comfort zone, and that you weren't planning. And God wants to send people into your life too. Will you let yourself be sent to others, and will you let others be sent into your life?

May you see the preparation God is already doing. May the Good News of Jesus be proclaimed to you, and through you. And may God's transforming work of Word and Spirit move you into life and mission.