

Acts 10: 1-48 – God speaks to the Gentiles.

God speaks through his prophet Isaiah in the Old Testament and says these words:

“For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways,” declares the Lord. “As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.” (Is.55)

God’s ways are not our ways.

As I look back on my life so far, I can think of lots of occasions when I have thought ‘I don’t know why this is happening this way, I don’t know why these things are happening to me right now.’ I was raised in a working class family in Yorkshire, son of a railway worker. I was the shy one, the quiet one. In education terms, no-one in our family got beyond CSe’s and O-levels. I was the one who went to university. Everyone else stayed around the family – I was the one who moved away. Not only that, but I moved to Lancashire! For a Yorkshireman that was treachery! It couldn’t get any worse – oh yes it could! Eventually I got a job in the south!! How bad was that?!

But as I look back now, I can see God’s wonderful hand at work through my life. He took me through O-levels to do A-levels so that I could meet the friend who would take me to church, and invite me to the weekend retreat where I became a Christian. God took me to university so that I would meet people who would introduce me to the south where I would eventually find this church, and also the very place (Hassocks) where I would work for 16 years now. He guided me to the south to find this church, but also to find my life companion and lovely wife, so that we could grow and serve him together.

I think so often we don’t know the reason for things that happen to us – it’s only as we look back later and see the overall picture, we can say ‘Oh, yes, that happened so we could do such and such; we met that person so that we could; we went to that place so that that could happen.’ Do you know something of that in your life? Have you felt too that you have been drawn in a certain direction so that something good or wonderful could happen?

God’s ways are not our ways.

I would like us to look together at something that happened and is recorded in the Acts of the Apostles in the New Testament. It concerns a man called Cornelius, and we must remember that these are historical records – this man actually existed and the events we are talking about actually happened. But what happened to him was so strange an occurrence at the time, and is evidence that God deals with people in a way they may not expect.

(It's in chapter 10 of Acts and is on page of the blue church bibles)

Firstly we see God preparing two very different men.

(Read verses 1 – 2.)

This event took place in the early days of Christianity – the people who had been with Jesus were going round Israel telling them the good news about Jesus. Cornelius was a centurion in the Roman army, so he represented the Roman people. He had probably been stationed at Caesarea on the north coast of Israel to keep peace there, and stop violence breaking out. So he would have probably been hated by the common people, but this became his home, and as the years went by, he seems to have come to some understanding of the Jewish God. He was devout and God-fearing; he prayed and helped the poor. He became respected by the Jews, as he was known as a godly and generous man. He was God-fearing, but there was still something missing. Even Satan believes in God, but we wouldn't call him Christian – just because we believe in God doesn't necessarily mean that we know God as he wants us to know him.

Let's read on. (Read verses 3 – 8.)

Cornelius clearly wants to know more about God. But what an amazing vision! God shows him an actual person, in an actual place that he should send to, to find out more about the God he is seeking. God tells Cornelius the name of the man – Simon Peter; he even tells him the person's house Peter is staying in – a tanner called Simon; and where the house is – by the sea in Joppa.

So we have a man who has been brought from Rome to a place where he is probably hated to start with. He understands something of the God the people around him worship. So much so that he wants to pray to him, and to get to know him better. This life would have been so different from the life he would have expected to lead in Rome. What would his family **there** have thought?

God's ways are not our ways. This man has been prepared by God for this time – brought from Rome, to meet the people he **has** met, to be introduced to God, and to be drawn to want a closer relationship with the God of the Christians. When he set out from Rome he wouldn't have known that this was what God intended for his life – God had a plan for his life and drew him to himself. But it's only as Cornelius looks back that he will see God's hand leading him.

God has a plan for your life and mine. Psalm 139 says *“All the days ordained for me were written in your book before one of them came to be.”* God had a plan for your life even before you came to be – isn't that amazing? Blows my mind. He knew all about me before I even existed! He leads us, he draws us closer to himself. Derek was sharing at our Harvest thanksgiving meetings that God wants us to enjoy him, that's what we're made for, to enjoy him. He prepares us for that, to enjoy a relationship with him that can become ever closer, ever deeper.

He prepared Cornelius for that time.

Let's look at Peter, one of Jesus' disciples. This was the man who denied knowing Jesus 3 times on the night Jesus was arrested. But now he is convinced that Jesus is the Son of God, and is telling everyone about him. He's many miles away from Cornelius – a day's walk away - in a place called Joppa. Cornelius couldn't text him, or send him an E-mail – he has to send his boys round.

(Read verses 9 – 23)

The important verse in this section is verse 15: *“Do not call anything impure that God has made clean.”* (x2) Up until now the Christian message has been spread through the Jewish people. Here God is preparing Peter to recognise that God has a message for **all** people, not only the Jews, but **all** people. Peter has this vision and coming to this realisation at the exact time that Cornelius' servants arrive to see him. God has spoken to Peter, God has sent these servants, God is preparing Peter's heart to recognise that God has no favourites.

This is wonderful news, isn't it? God has **no** favourites. In Paul's letter to the Christians in Rome he writes: *“for **all** have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,..”* All have sinned – it doesn't say, some have sinned more than others, or that some have committed greater sins than others. The truth of the matter is that we've **all** sinned –

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in a way, it doesn't matter how big or small, how frequent or infrequent our sins, we have all sinned, all of us have neglected God in our lives, in his eyes we are all as guilty as each other. Whatever you have been like so far, whatever sins you have committed, however bad you feel you have been, God regards us the same - we all, every single one of us have sinned – we all need God in our lives. God doesn't have favourites – no-one has sunk so low that God cannot have a relationship with him/her. Some people have to sink lower than others before they will **recognise** that they need God in their life, they need him to rescue them, to make them whole. Wonderful news.

[Where do you stand? God wants you to recognise that he loves you – yes, even you. **Nothing** can stop God having a relationship with you – ask for his forgiveness, for the wrong things in your life. He wants you to enjoy a relationship with him.]

God prepares Peter to accept that his message is not only for the Jewish people, but for everyone.

Let's read the final section of this wonderful story. (Read verses 23b – 48).

So Peter – like Cornelius did – responds straight away to what God is telling him to do – there's a message here for us too – if we know God wants us to do something, do we do it straight away? Anyway....

We see again how amazing it is that God has brought these two people together. Verse 28: *“You are well aware that it is against our law for a Jew to associate with a Gentile (that is a non-Jew) or visit him.”* God has prepared these two men to be drawn together so that they can both come closer to understanding God. This is the way it so often works – when we do what God wants us to do, we sometimes don't understand why he brings about certain events, but he works them for our good. There's a tremendous verse, again in Paul's letter to the Romans, saying *“all things work together for good to those who love God.”* Isn't that amazing? If we love God, if we want to do his will, **everything** works for our good.

So. What have we got here? We've got Cornelius, a man hundreds of miles from his home in Rome, believing in something he wouldn't have heard of at home, asking a man - Peter – who would normally not even have spent time with him, let alone visit him in his house, the two brought together by visions from God.

Now picture the scene – Cornelius has got all his family and friends together in this room to listen to what God has to say through Peter. We read in verse 33, “.. *we are all here in the presence of God to listen to everything the Lord has commanded you to tell us.*” It’s a bit like all of you this evening, all surrounding me, eager to hear what the Lord has commanded me to tell you. I can see you’re all very eager ... !

Well, we must look at the message that Cornelius needed to hear, that God **wanted** him to hear, and which Peter was now willing to pass on to him.

In Paul’s letter to the Corinthians (15:3 – 5) we read, “*For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance; that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, and that he appeared to Peter, and then to the twelve.*”

This, very concisely, is the Christian message. And whatever else we spend our time talking about, deliberating, debating, **these** are the vital things that Christians believe. These things cannot be altered – to water down the significance and meaning of these things would be to deny the good news of Christianity. **[We Christians will do well to take note of this, and concentrate on passing on these important points to those we witness to – these are the important things of the Christian faith]**

Christ died for our sins. Jesus came to seek and save the lost. He spent three years talking of the kingdom of God and performing miracles. But at the end of those three years, he was crucified. Here in verse 43 we read, “*everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name.*” When Jesus hung on that cross on that first Good Friday, it wasn’t for anything **he** had done that he hung there. “*The Lord has laid on him, the iniquity of us all*”, he took upon himself the punishment for **our** sins. He died so that we may be forgiven.

Why? Because God – the perfect God, God who cannot entertain sin in any shape or form – knew that we couldn’t have a relationship with him without that sin being paid for. We can’t get ourselves right with God, because our very nature tells us to try to exist **without** God – that’s what sin is. And only the sinless one – the only sinless man that has ever lived – the perfect Son of God -could pay that price for us. What a wonderful message. Jesus died that we may be forgiven.

He is *“the Way, the Truth and the Life.”* He has made it possible for us to be in relationship with God, because he took away our guilt by suffering for it on the Cross. He cried *“It is finished”* on the Cross because his work of salvation was finished – because he died, we can live, if we believe that he died for our forgiveness. *“To all who received him, to all who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God.”* Because Jesus died, we can know forgiveness for our neglect of God, and we can become children of God.

He was buried, he was raised on the third day. Yes, Jesus died – a spear was thrust into his side to prove it. Yes, Jesus was buried – he was sealed in a tomb, a massive rock placed over the entrance to his tomb. On that first Easter morning, his tomb was found to be empty. He had risen from the dead. He had overcome death. The tomb could not hold him – death could not hold him. This was the Son of God! Nothing can restrain God! Nothing and no-one can stand in the way of God fulfilling his will! Jesus was raised from the dead. Leaders of other religions lived, they died, and stayed dead! Jesus was raised from the dead and so is alive now!

How do we know? Well, he appeared in person to Mary, to Peter, to the men on the road to Emmaus, to the disciples. Doubting Thomas put his hand in Jesus’ side to prove he had risen from the dead. Jesus helped the disciples catch fish and he ate with them. He appeared to many people after he had been raised from the dead. Jesus appeared to these people. Peter says in verses 39 and 41 that he was one of many witnesses that Jesus lived, died, and rose again. If you have seen something with your own eyes, you **know** it happened. If lots of other people saw it as well, you **know** it happened. If the eye witnesses are then willing to die cruel and horrific deaths because of what they saw, I think we can **know** it happened.

Jesus is unique. Jesus died for our sins, he was buried, he was raised from the dead. No other person in history has done these things.

Martin Luther said, *“In his life Christ is an example showing us how to live; in his death, he is a sacrifice satisfying for our sins; in his resurrection, a conqueror; in his ascension a king; in his intercession a high priest.”* There is none like Jesus. No other has had such an enormous impact on people’s lives in history. No other **could** – Jesus is the **only** Son of God. Only **he** could become the Way for us to get back into a relationship with God. God sent his only Son, that whoever believes in him, shall not perish, but shall have eternal life. What a message, what a God.

Jesus lived, Jesus died, Jesus rose again, and he appeared to many. These are the important points of the Christian faith.

So what of Cornelius and his family and friends that were gathered there? They responded straight away. This was the **right time** for them to hear God's message of forgiveness and salvation. God had brought Cornelius all the way from Rome for this moment, God had brought Peter to his house, overcoming all his prejudice, a Jew preaching God's message to a non-Jew, and God would open Cornelius' eyes and heart to recognize Jesus as Lord and Saviour.

Most Christians are able to look to a specific time when God convinced them that Jesus **is** the Son of God, he died for **our** sins, he **was** raised from the dead. I was 18 when God spoke to me and convinced me of his truth, one Easter Sunday evening in the Dales of Yorkshire, I realised that Jesus died for **my** sins, he was **my** Saviour, he wanted me to live **his** way.

This is Cornelius' moment. God has drawn him. Jesus has become his personal Saviour. **We** have to come to that point – do **you** know God's leading? Do you know his drawing you ever closer to him? Can you see that his hand is upon your life? Becoming a Christian is only the **beginning** of a life of getting to know Jesus better.

That's where God wants us to be – he wants us to enjoy a wonderful loving relationship with himself. What's to stop us? If God's hand is upon you, recognize it. Jesus came that you may have life in all its fullness.

".. everyone who believes in Jesus receives forgiveness of sins in his name."

"Anyone who is in Christ [believing in him, trusting in him for forgiveness of sins] is a new creation."

I just want to finish by asking where do you stand this evening? Do you know forgiveness of your sins? Have you said goodbye to your old life neglecting God and are you experiencing that new life in Jesus? Are you rejoicing? You can. We can. It's on offer. Do you know fullness of life in Jesus? Are you getting to know him better every day? That's what he wants.