

Peter and Cornelius

The unexpected gospel

First of all I'd like to thank you all for generously letting me stand here and share this part of God's word with you. We're looking forward to getting to know you over the next little while, and we're very thankful to God for your partnership in growing God's kingdom in Italy.

1. Introduction: Meeting the Enemy

You may have heard of Corrie Ten Boom. She was born in the Netherlands in 1892, and when the Nazis occupied the Netherlands during World War II, she and her family sheltered Jews in their house. When they were discovered, they were arrested and imprisoned in concentration camps, where many of her family died. After the war, she became famous as an evangelist and as a speaker, travelling around the world telling people of the grace of Jesus. She tells the following story:

"It was in a church in Munich that I saw him—a balding, heavyset man in a gray overcoat, a brown felt hat clutched between his hands... It was 1947 and I had come from Holland to defeated Germany with the message that God forgives.

"And that's when I saw him, working his way forward against the others. One moment I saw the overcoat and the brown hat; the next, a blue uniform and a visored cap with its skull and crossbones. It came back with a rush: the huge room with its harsh overhead lights; the pathetic pile of dresses and shoes in the centre of the floor; the shame of walking naked past this man... He had been a guard at Ravensbruck concentration camp where we were sent.

“Now he was in front of me, hand thrust out: ‘A fine message, Fräulein! How good it is to know that, as you say, all our sins are at the bottom of the sea!’

“And I, who had spoken so glibly of forgiveness, fumbled in my pocketbook rather than take that hand... I was face-to-face with one of my captors and my blood seemed to freeze.

“ ‘But since that time,’ he went on, ‘I have become a Christian. I know that God has forgiven me for the cruel things I did there, but I would like to hear it from your lips as well. Fräulein,’ again the hand came out—‘will you forgive me?’

Can you imagine being there? Can you imagine what Corrie Ten Boom must have been feeling, looking this man in the face? What would you have done? What would you do now?

I assume none of us have the same kind of experience as Corrie Ten Boom, but we can relate to the idea in a small kind of way, can't we? We might not have 'enemies' in the same way as Corrie, but we all have, let's call them 'negative acquaintances' – people who, basically, we'd be happy not to see. They might be individual people, or even a whole group of 'type' of people. And quite frankly, if we're honest with ourselves, we're sortof almost a little bit glad that “those people”, whoever they are, aren't sitting here with us in church. Well this section of the book of Acts certainly has something to say to us, and especially to Jessica and myself as we head off to Italy.

Now I have to say, I really like this passage of Scripture – see there's not one but *two* people named Simon, and one of them goes to share the gospel with an Italian! What more could you want...?

2. The Italian Job (10:1-48)

(a) Cornelius and his Vision

Now [name] just read a passage from Acts chapter 11, but that passage really is just the last scene in a longer episode, which started back in 10:1, so look back there with me now.

In verse 1 we meet Cornelius, a centurion with the Italian Regiment. In all likelihood, he was Italian, in charge of Italian soldiers. So of course he's close to my heart. And not only is he Italian, but he is "devout and God-fearing" - he gives generously to the needy, and prays to God regularly. In short, Cornelius is a good guy. I like him!

And Cornelius is seemingly having a pretty normal day when something decidedly *not* normal happens to him - he sees a vision, an angel of God. And like most people who see an angel in the Bible, it's a frightening experience. And it turns out that God is *pleased* with Cornelius. A 'memorial offering' in verse 4 is the way some of the sacrifices in the Old Testament were described - offerings made by the Israelites as part of being God's special, chosen people. And here's this Italian soldier, a foreigner who's part of the army oppressing those same chosen people, whose conduct is pleasing to God in the same way! Luke, who wrote Acts, is giving us a big clue to what's coming next...

The angel tells Cornelius to send for the apostle Peter from the nearby town of Joppa, where at the end of chapter 9 we read about him doing some pretty amazing things, and staying with Simon the Tanner. [So there's our two Simons, by the way - the apostle Peter, who was **Simon** Peter, and Simon the Tanner]. Anyway Cornelius, fearing God, does as he's told and sends some of his men down to Joppa to fetch Peter.

(b) Peter and his Vision

Meanwhile in Joppa, Simon Peter is *also* praying. And he, too, sees a vision. A vision that is, well, weird. Peter's praying at lunchtime on the roof of the

house where he's staying, and cos it's lunchtime he gets hungry. And he sees a sheet coming down out of the sky with all kinds of animals on it – four-legged animals, birds, reptiles – I'm thinking most of the zoo is covered in those descriptions. Maybe no kangaroos, but pretty much every kind of animal is on this sheet. And a voice from the sky tells Peter 'Take this. Kill these and eat them. Lunch is served!'

But Peter won't have a bar of it – 'No way, Lord! I've never eaten anything unclean!'

But the voice from the heavens doesn't accept Peter's protest: "Don't call anything unclean that God has said is clean". And typical, hard-headed Peter obviously needs to be told more than once – because he and the heavenly voice have this conversation three times!

But Peter had good reason to be insistent – being *unclean* was a big deal for a Jew. If you were unclean because you had eaten or touched something unclean, or for a bunch of other reasons, then you couldn't come into the temple and worship God there – while you were unclean, you were cut off from the spiritual centre of Jewish life, and separated temporarily from God. So it makes sense for Peter to be insistent about staying clean.

But Peter seems to be a little bit selective here about cleanliness and purity. Remember who his host is? Simon the Tanner? A tanner, because they made leather and touched dead animal skins as part of their job, were almost consistently 'unclean'. And Peter, by staying in his house, would be considered unclean as well! Simon the Tanner was likely an outcast from polite Jewish society. Peter was happy to live in this unclean house, but not eat those unclean animals. I wonder whether we are sometimes similarly selective about the sort of person we're happy to associate with in church, as Christians. Do we sometimes size someone up and pre-judge whether they're "worth" telling about Jesus?

Either way, Peter is still wondering what on earth his vision means when there's a knock at the door. Cornelius' men have arrived, they explain who they are and why they've come, and invite Peter back to Cornelius' place. Under the prompting of the Holy Spirit, Peter invites them in and agrees to go

with them.

(c) The gospel to the Gentiles

When he gets to Cornelius' house, the penny has finally dropped for Peter – in verse 28 “God has shown [him] that [he] should not call *anyone* impure or unclean”. And this is despite the fact that the Jewish law forbids associating with or even visiting a Gentile (that's someone who isn't Jewish). Peter finally explains what his and Cornelius' visions both mean: “God does not show favouritism, but accepts from *every nation* the one who fears him and does what is right”. God has shown Peter that cleanness and uncleanness are no longer determined by your job, or your ethnicity, or your diet. God accepts *anyone* who fears him and does what is right, even if the so-called “good people” like Peter, or like you and I, wouldn't necessarily accept them ourselves. And even though he's a filthy Gentile, Cornelius is devout, fearing God and caring for the needy. So then Peter shares the good news of Jesus with Cornelius and his household. Let me read to you from verse 36. Peter starts with what has become public knowledge: Jesus' public life.

“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.”

Cornelius and his friends and family knew about this already; they'd no doubt heard reports of Jesus' teaching, and his miracles, and his great power. But Peter then tells them what they *haven't* heard:

“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.”

This, friends, is the gospel of Jesus Christ. There are loads of ways you can talk about the gospel, and the sermons we see in Acts show us some of them. I really love this one. Jesus Christ, the man who did such powerful works, and who taught such beautiful things, **was** raised to life, and people saw him, and ate and drank with him. He really was no longer dead, risen to new life. And it's *this* Jesus, this same man, is the one who will judge the living and the dead, and believing in means forgiveness of sins; restoration of a relationship with God! This is the gospel that Jesus' followers proclaimed in the first century, and it's the same gospel that we have to proclaim in the 21st.

(I) Fulfilling God's Promise

And this gospel isn't just for the “right people”, any more – not just for the Jews, who thought of themselves as God's chosen people. And they were right, but it seems that many Jews, Peter included, had fallen into thinking that just because the Jews were special, God didn't care about anyone except them. How wrong they were! Because what happens after Peter finishes his sermon? Look with me at verse 44:

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.

The Holy Spirit comes upon these Gentiles, these so-called “unclean” Italians. God is making His home within *these people*! How is that even possible?!

That's why the Jewish believers who have come with Peter are so stunned – even the Gentiles are receiving the Holy Spirit, “just as they have”, in verse 47. Earlier in Acts, in chapter 2, the Holy Spirit was poured out upon the first Christians, who were all Jewish. That was a big big *big* deal – for the first time God Himself lived **in** His people, not just among them. And now, scandalously, the exact same thing has happened to these filthy, unclean, definitely-not-God’s-type Gentiles!

But of course, they are God’s type, aren’t they? Just as God told Peter in his vision – don't call anything unclean that I've made clean! And that includes the Gentiles, and Simon the Tanner, and indeed Peter himself, and you and I and *anyone* who believes in Jesus Christ. The Holy Spirit makes us clean from the inside out, so that we can be totally acceptable to God, and stand confidently before Him. This is a major moment in world history – the first proof that you don't have to become Jewish to be part of the people of God. In the Old Testament there were non-Jews who joined in worshipping Yahweh, the God of Israel, but they had to become Jewish in order to truly part of His people. What has happened here has completely changed what it means to be one of God’s chosen people.

(c) In defence of the Holy Spirit

And this momentous shift is clearly scandalous to the Jewish Christians, because when the church in Jerusalem gets wind of what happened in Cornelius' house, they want answers. How could Peter *possibly* go and eat with and stay with those dirty, uncircumcised Gentiles?

In response Peter recounts what has happened over the past few days, and this is what [name] also read out for us earlier. The key verses here are 15-18:

‘As I began to speak, the Holy Spirit came on them as he had come on us at the beginning. Then I remembered what the Lord had said: “John baptised with water, but you will be baptised with the Holy Spirit.” So if God gave them the same gift he gave us

who believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I to think that I could stand in God's way?'

When they heard this, they had no further objections and praised God, saying, 'So then, even to Gentiles God has granted repentance that leads to life.'

Isn't this a wonderful way to resolve a problem? Peter describes how he **remembered** what Jesus had said, that believers would be baptised with the Holy Spirit. And that helped him make sense of what he saw around him – that the Gentiles were indeed receiving the Holy Spirit. And I love how Peter phrases this next part – “who was I to think that I could stand in God's way?”

And the Jerusalem church then have the same realisation as Peter – instead of having a problem with these unclean and impure Gentiles, they *rejoice* and *praise God* that He has welcomed even the Gentiles as His people.

3. Conclusion: Loving your Enemies

And that brings us nicely back to Corrie Ten Boom, and her dilemma and turmoil as she faced one of her former captors and tormentors. She doesn't say this, but I wouldn't be surprised if she had at least a fleeting thought about Acts chapter 11. She recounts how intensely she *didn't* want to forgive and welcome this man who had done such evil...

I stood there with the coldness clutching my heart. But forgiveness is not an emotion—I knew that too. Forgiveness is an act of the will, and the will can function regardless of the temperature of the heart. '... Help!' I prayed silently. 'I can lift my hand. I can do that much. You supply the feeling.'

“And so woodenly, mechanically, I thrust my hand into the one stretched out to me. And as I did, an incredible thing took place. The current started in my shoulder, raced down my arm, sprang

into our joined hands. And then this healing warmth seemed to flood my whole being, bringing tears to my eyes.

“ ‘I forgive you, brother!’ I cried. ‘With all my heart!’

“For a long moment we grasped each other’s hands, the former guard and the former prisoner. I had never known God’s love so intensely, as I did then”

The gospel of Jesus Christ not only transforms individuals, it transforms entire communities, entire societies. People who were once enemies by nature, like Jews and Gentiles, like Nazis and their former victims, people who would love nothing better than to keep on hating one another – the gospel brings those people together. Because the same Holy Spirit that was given to the first Jewish believers in Christ is the same Holy Spirit who was given to Cornelius and his household that day when Peter preached to them. He is the same Holy Spirit who dwells in each and every Christian who has ever lived, and God does not show favouritism! He will welcome anyone who truly believes in Jesus Christ, whether they’re a Jewish fisherman, a Roman Centurion, a little Dutch girl, a Nazi officer, an Italian university student, a refugee, a merchant banker, or anyone in between.

Peter would *never* have gone to Cornelius' house unless God had prompted him (again, an unclean Jewish tanner was higher in Peter's eyes than a devout and God-fearing Gentile), and similarly Cornelius would never have invited Peter in the first place unless God had prompted *him*. Corrie Ten Boom would never have accepted and welcomed and loved that Nazi the way she did if not for God's internal prompting. We might not have had an experience as vivid or as extreme as Peter, Cornelius or Corrie, but I suspect that many of us still have that uncharitable thought about various people – God seriously wants *them*? Why on earth? Of course the answer to that sinful thought is that God is far more loving, far more determined to bring people to Himself, than we are. He loves the unlovely and the unloved, the outcast and the despised – even the unclean outsider. And of course that's what we would be without God

anyway, wouldn't it?

So the challenge I've felt from reading this part of God's word is the challenge to follow the lead of the Jerusalem church – to hear of what God is doing, to be bold in presenting Jesus to anyone who will listen (even if I don't think they're God's "type", or not my "type"), and most of all to *rejoice* that God even pours out His Holy Spirit on awful, terrible, sinful people like you and me, filthy Gentiles. Our God is an **awesome** God.

Will you pray with me?