

SPREADING THE WORD

(Acts 10.9-23)

Introduction

The Apollo 11 mission was one of the greatest ever human achievements. Neil Armstrong, when he became the first man to walk on the surface of the moon on July 11, 1969 said "That's one small step for a man, one giant leap for mankind."

The tenth chapter of Acts is even more significant than the moon landings in eternal terms. It describes one small encounter between two men, Peter and Cornelius, but it was a great leap forward for the kingdom of God. It is a pivotal episode in the history of the relationship between God and the human race.

It was the day that the good news of God's love and salvation through Jesus, penetrated the non-Jewish world for the first time. From this day forward, God, who had until then been revered only by a small Semitic people in the Middle East, would become worshipped and loved worldwide.

1) God is revealed to those who seek him with their whole heart

Acts 10 shows that God reveals himself to people who truly seek him. God loves to be found by curious and tenacious people.

Speaking of Cornelius, an officer of the Roman army, the Bible says (in v2-4) "He was devout and loved God, him and all his household. He was generous to the poor of the people and prayed to God at all times."

One day, about three in the afternoon, he had a vision: he distinctly saw an angel of God who said, 'Cornelius.' Cornelius nervously asked: 'What is it, Lord?' The angel answered, 'your prayers and generosity towards the poor have been received by God and intervened on your behalf.'"

The big surprise to many is that Cornelius, despite his righteousness, all his good works, and all his prayers, was not a child of God.

He was sincere, but not saved. He was charitable on the outside but not changed by God on the inside. He was a believer, but his was not saving faith. He had no personal experience of God. He approached a God he did not know. He had not received the Holy Spirit. There are many people like Cornelius. The good news is that God reveals Himself to those who seek him with their whole heart as he did.

Jonathan Aitken, the disgraced politician was appointed to the Cabinet in the 1990s but his life was empty and he started to seek God. He says in his autobiography *Pride and Perjury*, "Gnawing away inside me was a problem I could not describe, except by giving it... labels such as 'lack of inner peace', 'emptiness of feeling', 'hollowness of spirit', or more simply 'something missing'. It was as though, after spending a lifetime wanting to climb a particular mountain, I had unexpectedly reached the final approach to its summit only to discover that there was nothing there worth the effort of the ascent." Well, he sought God, found him and is now a lay preacher.

CS Lewis once said "Look for Christ and you will find him. And with him everything else." This is why we spread the word.

2) God takes us out of the sterile religion

The second thing that God shows us in Acts 10 is that religious adherence is not enough. Teresa of Avilla once prayed, "From silly devotions and sour-faced saints, spare us O Lord."

This is the meaning of this strange vision Peter has in v9-16. Until that time, for Peter, belonging to God was an obsession about what he could and could not eat. Jesus had already said that the only things that make someone unclean were those things that come from the heart; hatred, rudeness, lies, jealousy... But Peter did not understand what Jesus said.

Mechanical religion is one of the biggest obstacles, if not the greatest, between us and God. Religion stirs strong emotions and tends to make us stubborn.

The proof is that in v14, having had a fantastic spiritual experience and heard the audible voice of God, Peter says "Oh, no! Lord. I've always lived this way, I do not intend to change for anyone, even the Lord of hosts."

I love the (probably made-up) story of the vicar who wanted to move a chair in his church on one side of the sanctuary to another. But the choir master didn't agree. The chair was always located in the south transept and moving against the wall was out of the question. For 3 years they fought about it in church council. The choir master wrote letters to the bishop. Fifty faithful parishioners organized a petition. And the priest eventually moved the chair... an inch per week! It took 3 years to move it to the other side!

Aren't you glad that Jesus gets us out of useless religion? Christ sets us free from all that. This is why we spread the word.

3) God destroys the barriers between people

The third thing here is how the gospel removes the barriers between people. In Christ, there is neither Jew nor Greek, neither man nor woman, neither black nor white, socialist or capitalist, neither Anglican or Protestant or Catholic, neither young nor old, remain or leave. All racial, national, sociological, political, physiological and ecclesiastical barriers come down through Jesus Christ.

Before the events of Acts 10, Peter had never entered a gentile home, even for shelter from a storm, but in v23 he invites them in and offers them hospitality for the night. God wants to bring down the barriers between people.

This is why we spread the word. It's good news that sets people free.

Ending

There's a YouTube video about a rock singer from the band Flyleaf called Lacy Sturm. She talks about her tormented years. She says "I couldn't get away from my own depression." She tried a lot of religions and philosophies. She said "There were all these great ideas but I never found any tangible healing." She said "I remember thinking I am tired of the pain in my heart. I am tired of going to bed and feeling this burden. Who am I? Why am I alive?"

One day Lacy woke up and resolved to end her life at the end of that day. Well, that evening, by the grace of God, her grandmother whom she lived with, said, "You are coming to church with me *now*."

Lacy said, "I didn't want to go to church, I despised it, I never went – but look, I'm going to commit suicide later, it can't get worse, so I might as well go to church."

So she went. She said, "I hated it - especially the preacher." [I just thought I'd include that bit in case any of you can relate to it].

Anyway, the preacher, as he was speaking had a word from the Lord and so he said, "There's someone here with a suicidal spirit." That got her attention. But she couldn't stand what he was saying, so she got up and went to walk out. As she got to the back of the church a man with a white goatee beard came over to her and said, "I think the Lord wants me to say something to you."

She thought, here we go again. Then he said this; "He wants you to know that even if you've never known your earthly father, [which she hadn't] he knows your pain and will be a better father to you than any man could have been. He knows your pain. He knows what's in your heart. He's seen you cry yourself to sleep. He wants to come and deal with it. He is called The Comforter."

She says, "It was as if the God of the universe showed up right in front of me. I realised that God is holy and good. And that I am not. And that he

loves me and he knows I am tired of the way I have been living and that he wants to make me new - if I would let him. And I said YES! I want that please. And I woke up the next day with such peace and such joy."

This is why we spread the word. We have good news of grace to share.

Let's pray...