

During the Easter season every year we read from the Acts of the Apostles. But we read it in small chunks, so it's easy to miss the big picture. Case in point is the story of Cornelius the Centurion. This is one of three pivotal chapters in the book of Acts. The whole book hinges on the events of chapters 8, 9, and 10. Chapter 8, which we heard last week, told of Deacon Philip baptizing an Ethiopian Eunuch, making him the first non-Jewish Christian. Chapter 9 is the familiar story of the Paul having a vision of Jesus on the Road to Damascus. We read that every year on our Patronal Feast Day, the Conversion of St. Paul in January. And chapter 10 tells the story of Cornelius the Centurion.

The story of Cornelius is made up of 7 scenes. Scene #6 was our lesson today. Every year on Easter Sunday we hear Scene #5. And next year we'll hear Scene #7. It's a hugely important story. But we only hear it in pieces-parts and not as a whole. So, since things are so choppy, I want to look at the story as a whole before focusing in on our lesson today, scene #6.

Scene 1:

In ch10 of Acts, we meet Cornelius. He's part of the Italian Cohort, made up of 600 soldiers. He's a Centurion, the commander of 100 soldiers. He's stationed in Caesarea, the Roman capitol of Judea. Centurions were the backbone of the Roman army. Rome wanted to ensure their loyalty. So the Centurion's salary was 16 times the salary of the average soldier. That meant that Centurions were rather well off financially. But remember, he's rather well off because it's his job to be part of a military force that's occupying someone else's country. The Jews despised the occupying Romans. So, on the surface, from a Jewish standpoint, we'd expect him to be the bad guy.

But then we're told some other things about Cornelius. He is called a "devout man" who "feared God." This is something of a code. It means that he is a Gentile who has been flirting with Judaism. He's been dabbling on the fringes of Judaism. There are a number of Gentiles in the Roman empire who were attracted to Jewish Monotheism. However, the idea of having to be circumcised as an adult was NOT attractive. So these people didn't officially convert. They just hung out on the fringes of Judaism.

Cornelius is apparently one of them, one of the "God fearers." He is attracted to the God of Israel. And Luke says that Cornelius gives alms generously and prays constantly. These are things that good Jews are called to do.

One afternoon, God intervenes. God sends Cornelius a vision. Cornelius is told to send some men 30 miles south to fetch some guy named Simon Peter in Joppa, modern day Tel Aviv. Cornelius doesn't know why. But he complies. He sends his men to do as God commands. It seems the centurion knows how to follow orders from above.

Scene Two:

The next day at noon, Simon Peter is praying on the roof of the house where he's staying. And God intervenes again. Peter falls into a spiritual trance. He has a vision of a large linen picnic blanket being lowered from heaven. In the middle of the sheet are all sorts of

animals, some which are kosher, and others which aren't. Peter hears a voice that says, "Kill and eat."¹ 'Have some pork, shrimp and catfish.'

Peter objects—'I've never broken Jewish dietary laws.' Why should I start now?

For ancient Jews, these Laws were not incidental. These laws helped them draw a line around Judaism. That line defined who they were. If they didn't pay attention to that line, they were afraid they would be obliterated as a people. They'd be just like everyone else around them. This is not a matter of etiquette. This is a matter of survival as a people. So Peter objects 3 times. But God replies, "What God has made clean, you must not call profane."²

Scene 3:

While Peter is still confused by the vision of the sheet, the men from Cornelius show up. Peter is told that these men were sent by God. They tell Peter about Cornelius and his vision.

And in response, Peter does something remarkable. He invites these men to stay with him.

This is amazing. Good Jews did not eat like Gentiles. They certainly wouldn't eat with Gentiles. And they'd never have Gentiles as house guests. And yet, Peter invites these men to stay. Apparently, something is happening with Peter.

Scene 4:

Peter and the men head back to Caesarea. When Peter arrives, Cornelius falls prostrate at his feet. It's quite a reversal. The military occupier is on the floor in front of one of the people whose land he's occupying. But, Peter makes him stand up.

And then, they share their visions with each other. Actually, Peter says something quite remarkable: "You yourselves know that it is unlawful for a Jew to associate with or to visit a Gentile; but God has shown me that I should not call anyone profane or unclean."³

Notice the shift here. God gave Peter a vision of clean and unclean foods. But Peter has interpreted it to mean clean or unclean people. Peter is no longer going to put himself in the place of God. He's no longer going to be the one to judge others, whether they're profane or unclean. That's up to God, not him.

And he emphasizes that in a brief sermon which is Scene 5. Peter says, "I truly understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him."⁴

¹ Acts 10:13

² Acts 10:15

³ Acts 10:28

⁴ Acts 10:34-35

Then Peter proclaims the death and resurrection of Jesus, which is why we read Scene 5 every year on Easter Sunday. But the thing that is revolutionary in the context of the story of Cornelius is the assertion that anyone who believes in God is acceptable to him. And then to underscore that point, Peter says again, "All the prophets testify about Jesus that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name."⁵

What Peter is saying is that being part of the people of God is no longer a matter of being born into the right ethnic, or cultural, or religious group. Instead, everyone who believes in Jesus is saved.

Which brings us to Scene 6, which is our lesson for today.

We pick up with the words, "While Peter was still speaking..." In other words, Peter is just getting warmed up with his sermon. But God intervenes yet again. This intervention is sometimes labeled the Gentile Pentecost.

Acts says, "While Peter was still speaking, the Holy Spirit fell upon all who heard the word."

This is a remarkable turning point in Christianity. God's gift of the Holy Spirit is not for Jews alone, but it is for all who believe in Jesus.

God underscores Peter's proclamation. God intervenes with a powerful sermon illustration. Peter has said God does not show partiality. And sure enough, God does not show partiality. This is a revolutionary thought for the Jews. The Jewish Christians are astounded that the gift of the Holy Spirit is given to Cornelius and his household.

Then Peter asks, "Can anyone withhold the water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?"

The message is clear. The Holy Spirit is not under control of the church. It's up to the church to follow where the God's Spirit leads the way. The church doesn't baptize in order to force the Spirit to act. The Spirit acts in calling these people, and the church follows by baptizing.

So, Cornelius and his household, presumably his parents, his children, and his slaves are all baptized in the name of Jesus. And then, a crucial statement is made at the end of our lesson: The new believers invite Peter to stay with them for several days. Why? The assumption is that now that they're Christians, they need to learn more. Their baptism is not an end in itself. It's only the beginning.

This story turns out to be a conversion story. In fact, it's a double conversion story. Cornelius and his household are converted. And Peter and the Christian Church are converted.

⁵ Acts 10:43

It turns out that God is no respecter of persons. Our human categories of race and class and status and power and ethnicity and wealth mean nothing to God. All who believe are called into relationship with God.

And that call is not an end. It is a beginning. When anyone comes to the waters of baptism, it's a beginning. It's a double beginning. Those who are baptized are committing themselves to beginning a relationship with God in Jesus Christ. We who witness their baptism are committing ourselves to welcoming them into the fellowship of faith.

We don't choose God's followers. God chooses them.

All of us are simply called to follow where the Spirit leads the way.