

We're just going to look at Acts again. Today we have the third part of our teaching series entitled "Spreading the Good News". In this series we are looking at how the early church responded to some of the missional challenges they faced in its first few months of existence. This week marks an important turning point in the development of the church and its mission to reach all people. We're going to read Acts 10:1-48 - now that's quite a long reading: it is the all the whole of chapter 10, and so I'm going to read and I hope that you'll be able to follow it in your own Bibles (I'm reading as usual from the New International Version). So starting the beginning of chapter 10 of the book of Acts.

[Reading Acts 10:1-48]

That was a long reading; we're going to reflect together on that reading together in the moment.

So, up until to this point, the church has essentially been a small but growing subsection of the Jewish faith. Non-Jews who wanted to join the church had a first fulfil the Jewish Law and get circumcised. In effect, they had to become Jews before they could become Christians. In this passage, God shows Peter that the Christian is to be adaptable, it's to be for all people at all times and in all places. And from these verses we can discover some principles for reaching the unreached; principles for reaching those who don't yet know the good news of Jesus.

So the first of these principles. In order to reach individuals and people who do not know Jesus, it's necessary to launch into the unknown. Those first Christians might have been tempted to just settle back into the comfort of their Jewish culture and customs, and simply spread the message amongst their own people. But God had other plans. In fact Peter had already started on the journey of overcoming his prejudices towards those who were not from his own religious culture. You may remember that last week we noted that Peter stayed with Simon the Tanner; now a Tanner was someone who worked with leather and therefore came into contact with both dead animals and, sometimes, with pigs (both of those dead animals and pigs were taboo for a devout Jew to even touch). And this week we find that Peter is prepared to stay in the home of another non-Jew: a man by the name of Cornelius - he was a Roman soldier (now of course Roman soldiers were despised by most Jews as members of the occupying military forces). Now this man, Cornelius, he was God-fearing - that means he followed the Jewish pattern of prayer and of lifestyle, but he had not converted to Judaism properly. So this Roman soldier, albeit God-fearing, no good devout Jewish person would be prepared to enter his home and, in fact, Peter refers to that in the reading when he's talking to Cornelius and his family and close friends. So God had already been working in Peter's life to challenge his Jewish preconceptions, but the vision that he had (and we read about that in verses 11-16 of our reading) was like a bolt from heaven. And it was such a shock to Peter that, of course, Peter's initial reaction was to say "No, surely not Lord." In this trance, in this vision, he saw those animals coming down on the sheet and said, "Lord, you can't expect me to eat these sorts of animals that I have never touched in my life, because I believed it was wrong." And Peter quickly interprets that vision, that it's not simply about what Peter chooses to eat, or not to eat; he actually recognised that this is symbolic: it's symbolic of the fact that as Peter refuses to eat certain types of meat, he rejects it as impure, that that's a symbol of his rejection of certain people as impure. And he recognises and interprets to the family of

Cornelius the fact that God is challenging him, and he says (in verses 34 and 35), "I now realise how true it is that God does not show favouritism but accepts people from every nation who Fear him and do what is right." We are also called to befriend and connect people with people whose cultures, attitudes and lifestyles may be very different to our own. We're called to be good friends, good neighbours, good work colleagues; we are called to be people who share our lives with others around us in whatever situation we find ourselves. Now some Christians like to sit in criticism of those who live according to different standards and different lifestyles, but I try to put into practice a simple statement made by one of my favourite Christian writers that you've heard me refer to before – an American Franciscan Friar by the name of Richard Rohr; he says this: "The best critique of the bad is the practice of the better." "The best critique of the bad is the practice of the better." In other words instead of wagging our fingers in the faces of people we should try to humbly live in a way that witnesses to a better way of being human.

So that's the first principal of how to reach those who do not yet know about the good news of Jesus: we have to be prepared to launch into the unknown.

Another principle of how to reach those who do not yet know about the good news of Jesus, is to **Respond to the Vision**. We have two people in this passage who actually had to respond to visions that God sent to them: both Cornelius and Peter had to be prepared to respond to the challenge that came to them through their visions. They had to be prepared to hear and to act on the prompting they received from God to enable a major change of mindset to happen for both of them. Despite his prayers and his generosity Cornelius knew what his need was: he knew that as God came to him in this vision that he had to respond, and actually he showed great humility when he met Peter (in verse 25) by throwing himself down on the floor. And Peter himself was prepared to respond step-by-step to the leading of God – God could have spoken directly to Cornelius, and to say to him: "I love you and care for you even though you are a Roman and not of the Jewish faith"; God could have chosen to go directly and speak to Cornelius and say that to him. But God didn't choose to. So often God chooses to speak through other human beings – that in my experience is so often the way that God works: he wants his word to someone to take on flesh, in the sense of being delivered through another person who shares that message from the Lord. And Peter himself was prepared to respond step-by-step to the leading of God. So, initially he went to stay with Simon the Tanner, and then from there received these people who have come from Cornelius to say "Come and stay, come and meet our master and speak to him, and tell him the message that God has given you!" So Peter had to respond step-by-step to the leading of God in this chapter that we've read from Acts. So this was not Peter venturing out at random into the unknown just doing what he thought was right, rather he was carefully and prayerfully discerning God's will, and I think that should also provide a pattern for mission today: that mission is not simply about going out and doing whatever we want, but rather carefully and prayerfully discerning God's will about how we share God's message with those who don't know him, and how we do that in a way that is sensitive and effective, and responsive to God's Holy Spirit, led by him. Because whilst we want to honour the courage and devotion of previous generations of missionaries we also have to acknowledge that damage caused by some of them through their insensitivity as they rode roughshod over cultures and customs that they did not understand or value. A book I've had on my shelf for many years is called "Christianity Rediscovered". It's written by a man called Vincent Donovan and it deals with this exact issue of cultural insensitivity in mission. Father Vincent was a Roman Catholic missionary sent amongst the Masai people of Tanzania, and he was appalled at how his predecessors and his fellow missionaries sought to undermine weaken the fabric and the structures of Masai culture in order to force their

understanding of church on to these people. On one occasion, after having described some cultural insensitivity performed by his denomination, father Vincent wrote these words: "my heart ached in its inability to love the church as it was, and longed to see it and love it as it was meant to be." There may be limited situations in which cross cultural missionaries such as father Vincent are still required. (Cross-cultural missionaries are those who are going from one particular culture into a very different culture and sharing gospel.) There may be limited situations in which such multicultural missionaries are still required, but most mission agencies now recognise that the most effective work is done by indigenous people, indigenous workers working amongst their own people; and I would say to you I believe this is true whether it is amongst the most remote tribes in far-flung parts of the world, or among the LGBTQ+ community in Britain (or in Croydon), or connecting with those of other faith's in Britain (or in Croydon) – cultural sensitivity is so important in sharing the gospel of Jesus Christ. These days, mission to unreached people groups (both in Britain and abroad) is seen as much more of a partnership between individuals offering their particular skills coming from their particular culture and customs, and it's a partnership with well resourced churches offering their money and their prayers, and it's a partnership with mission agencies who offer their matchmaking and their support skills (by matchmaking I mean bringing together those individuals who are from a culture, often from the same culture, where they can connect with others within their culture, and supporting and resourcing them as they minister, and as they reach out with the gospel. Mission today is really seen as a partnership between all of those individuals, churches and mission agencies.

So, that's the second of our principals, Responding to the Vision – the vision that God gives of how mission is to be carried forward.

The third principle that I want to pick up on in reaching out to those who do not yet know about the good news of Jesus, is to make sure that we see the bigger picture; see the bigger picture. Although missionary work can be laborious and very long-term, it should be seen as part of God's plan of reconciling all things in this universe to himself. In 1786 a young man by the name of William Carey approached a meeting of Baptist ministers to seek their support for overseas mission. The chairman of this group of Baptist ministers said to Carey, "Sit down, young man, when it pleases the Lord to convert the heathen he will do it without your help or mine." (There's an enlightened Baptist minister for you.) Thankfully Carey ignored that Baptist minister, and six years later founded the Baptist Missionary Society (which of course is now BMS World Mission). Carey realized that although the mission to reach the unreached came from the heart and the desire of God, unless human beings were willing to pray and seek God's heart then that mission would not be fulfilled. In our reading (from Acts chapter 10) Peter and Cornelius were open to being used by God for a purpose that they initially could not see. But because they were open to God's leading, his plan of reaching those who did not yet know of him was carried forward beyond the Jewish people into the multicultural melting pot of the Gentile world. And thank God that it did because that is the reason that you, and I, are now part of the body of Christ – because that mission was a one move out from the Jewish community out into the Gentile world. So I invite you to join me this week in praying for God's worldwide mission, that it will be extended but also that it will continue to be performed country sensitively, in ways that respect the cultures into which it is coming, and that it will recognise that there are many aspects of the cultures into which it is coming, that actually are not anti-faith or not anti-Christian faith, are not damaging but actually are part of the strength of the societies into which the gospel is coming. And we pray that God's kingdom will be extended.

We're going to finish with a prayer together, and I invite you to join me as we pray. I'm going to

just share this prayer from Mother Teresa of Calcutta and she says: "Here I am Lord, body, heart and soul. Grant that with your love I may be big enough to reach your world, and small enough to be at one with you." Amen