

Sermon for the Sixth Sunday of Easter

The text: Acts 10:44-48

In Acts 10 we hear about the conclusion of the incident where the Apostle Peter witnesses the way God wanted to include the Gentiles (those beyond Israel) in the promises of his kingdom. Peter witnessed God pouring out his Holy Spirit on the household of Cornelius and he *said*, “*Surely no one can stand in the way of their being baptised with water. They have received the Holy Spirit just as we have*” (Acts 10:47).

This was God’s way of saying that all people are created equal. But has that message got through to us in 2021? We don’t really treat everyone as equal. If you go to board a plane at the airport you will see two separate lines: one for economy and one for business class. Of course, you have to pay for that privilege.

Money certainly talks loudly in our world. It grants access and rights, establishing all sorts of exclusive little clubs. It impacts on where you can afford to live, on what schools you can send your children to and on what kind of restaurants and shops you can afford to patronise. And it is not just money that creates this exclusivity.

It could be your culture or your bloodline or your level of education or your looks or your system of beliefs or any other number of factors that determine where you find yourself on the different pecking orders of life.

Sometimes there are very obvious distinctions – like in the Indian caste system where you have the untouchables at the bottom of the social rung. But there are also far more subtle distinctions, like ones we make in our society. We might not always be conscious of the way we alter our behaviour toward someone depending on their weight or clothes or hairstyle or whether they have tattoos. But we do it just the same.

But God is above this kind of thing, isn’t he? God is not about to judge us according to our skin colour or our bank balance or our fashion sense or the number of letters we have after our name or any of these other superficial distinctions.

Yet at times in the Old Testament it might not seem like this. From God's promise to Abraham to "*make you into a great nation, and I will bless you*" (Genesis 12:2) came the nation of Israel—God's chosen ones, the ones he favoured, the ones he rescued from the hands of slavery to the Egyptians and the ones he gave the Promised Land to at the exclusion of all other races and peoples.

By the time Jesus was born, in the land of the tribe of Judah in the line of the great Jewish King, David, the Jews had been reminded of their treasured status as God's holy nation for more than two thousand years.

But with the coming of Jesus, the global aspect of God's mission was emphasized. Jesus said that "*repentance and forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to **all nations***" (Luke 24:47) and he commanded his disciples to "*make disciples of **all nations***" (Matthew 28:19).

On the day of Pentecost, the Old Testament prophesy from Joel was fulfilled: "*In the last days, God says, 'I will pour out my Spirit on **all people**'*" (Acts 2:17). The Spirit enabled the disciples to speak in other tongues so that people from all sorts of different nationalities could hear the good news of Jesus.

In today's reading from Acts 10, Peter proclaims: 'I truly understand that God shows no partiality' (Acts 10:34). From a worldly point of view Cornelius had rights. As a centurion he was a VIP in the 1st century Roman world. He went straight to the head of the queue. His position gave him power and prestige. He also appeared to have been well liked and respected in the broader community, including among the Jews. When some men went to fetch Simon Peter to meet with Cornelius they said to Peter: "*He is a righteous and God-fearing man, who is respected by all the Jewish people*" (v22).

All of these things counted in Cornelius' favour in the pecking orders of the world. But none of them could gain him inclusion in God's kingdom.

Now came the vital lesson that everyone needed to learn, a lesson that was driven home in no uncertain terms. Inclusion in God's kingdom is always and only at the instigation of God and by his grace and power.

The parallels between what happened in Cornelius' house and what happened on the Day of Pentecost in Jerusalem are unmistakable—which has led many scholars to consider this account in Acts 10 as the Pentecost equivalent for the Gentiles. But we should really see both

events as equally significant for Jew and Gentile alike as God seeks to communicate the universality and inclusivity of the Gospel of Jesus.

In both cases, Acts 2 and Acts 10, the Holy Spirit was *'poured out'* on the people who were gathered (Acts 2:17,33; 10:45). In both cases one of the manifestations of the Spirit was the speaking in different *'tongues'* (Acts 2:3,4,6; 10:46). In both cases the response of those who witnessed it was *'astonishment'* (Acts 2:7,12; 10:45). And in both cases the Spirit was referred to as *'God's gift'* (Acts 2:38; 10:45).

The result was a complete change in Peter's attitude. It was no accident that God had drawn this key leader of the early church to the house of Cornelius to witness this. So Peter said: *"Surely no one can stand in the way of their being baptized with water. They have received the Holy Spirit just as we have"* (Acts 10:47).

God sent his only Son, our Lord Jesus, to reconcile the world to himself. Inclusion in God's kingdom is always and only by God's grace and power. We might differ in the upbringing we have received and in the type of family we are from. We might differ on the amount of our salaries, on our level of education, on the quality of our clothes and homes and the number of tattoos we have. But there is no pecking order in God's family. There is no one who has a greater right to be here than anyone else and no one is here except by the work of the Holy Spirit who has included each of us. That should surely impact the way we view and treat each other. It should surely also impact the way we view and treat those who do not yet belong to God's kingdom.

May we never make a judgment that the message of Jesus is not for any particular type of person for whatever reason. May we never stand in the way of anyone being received into God's kingdom for any bias we might have. Instead, may we welcome all people equally with God's love, even as he has welcomed each one of us—completely by grace! Amen.