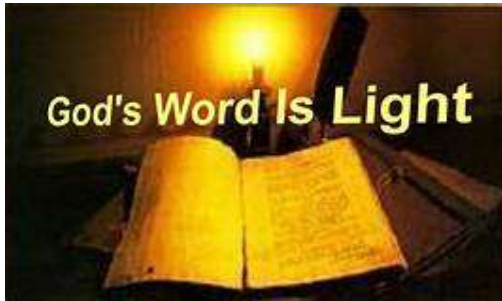


SERMON – 9 MAY 2021 – Acts 10.44-end, John 15.9-17

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.



It does infuriate me when the bible reading is so short it's hardly worth standing up for, and when, more importantly, it doesn't give us the context. We've had various odd bits from the first few chapters of the Acts of the Apostles over the last few weeks – spend a useful half an hour with the book reading it from the beginning, put all these odd stories in their place.



We are in Caesarea, which is not the Caesarea Philippi Jesus and his disciples visited – this town is a major Roman settlement on the coast, now it is one of coastal towns of Israel. In Caesarea there is a man called Cornelius, a centurion of an Italian cohort – so we can assume Cornelius was not a Jew, was not a local. He was not the first non-Jew to follow Jesus – we learned about an Ethiopian eunuch last week, even more exotic than an Italian centurion – but a Roman centurion is not the sort of person you would expect to feature in our story just a year or two after Jesus' death. After all, Jesus was a Jewish Messiah, crucified by a Roman garrison. Another centurion had been in charge of that crucifixion, and he had affirmed that "This man was the Son of God". I wonder if two centurions had sat down together in the pub and discussed who Jesus was.



Cornelius had a faith, a faith in God – and he saw an angel of the Lord. The angel told him to send to the house of Simon the tanner, who lived by the sea in the town of Joppa, as a man called Peter was staying there. (Joppa is the town we now know as Jaffa, so it's where the oranges come from). If Peter was a devout Jew, he would have been unlikely to stay with a tanner – after the Jews have strict rules about what is clean and unclean, and a tanner is hardly likely to ensure these rules are kept. Peter was praying, he's hungry and has a vision – a vision of animals he can kill for food. (I found this somewhat fanciful image on line – giraffe steak anyone?)



It's a vegetarian's nightmare. "Kill and eat" says the voice, "I can't, it's unclean" says Peter. "What God has created, what God has made clean, you must not call profane."

Then the messengers from Cornelius arrive. He has been directed by an angel to ask for Peter to come to him, and Peter has no doubt that that is who is called to go and see, where he is called to go. Peter doesn't go alone, some of the believers in Joppa go too – I'm told it's about 40 miles, so that's a considerable journey. When they get to Caesarea, Cornelius is waiting with relatives and close friends – they want to know more.



When Peter arrives he kneels to greet him, and Peter says he's only a mortal – don't kneel to worship me, I'm not divine. I'm a Jew, I shouldn't be here – but God has sent me, and I have come.

“I truly understand that God shows no partiality, ³⁵but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him. ³⁶You know the message he sent to the people of Israel, preaching peace by Jesus Christ—he is Lord of all.”

Peter tells them that Jesus was anointed by God, that he did good, he healed, he cast out the devil, that he was put to death, that he rose again, that he appeared to believers – and that they are his messengers. Peter and the people from Joppa are God’s messengers – which, as ordinary men and women, is surely something rather special.



“Peter in the House of Cornelius”, by Barend Fabritius, 1653

Then the Holy Spirit falls on all the people present – the people from Joppa and Cornelius and those from Caesarea. The gift was poured out – think of Psalm 23, my cup is full and runs over. A few months ago at Pentecost, Peter and the disciples had experienced the Holy Spirit with rushing wind and tongues of fire – we’ll focus on that experience in a fortnight’s time.



In churches and communities around the world people feel the power of the Spirit – and we feel it in all sorts of different ways, because we are all different

people. Some will feel the Holy Spirit in loud, dynamic ways – others of us feel that sense of well-being, that quiet sense that God is at work.



That is not always easy to believe – it's the start of Christian Aid week tomorrow and their focus is on the *Double Threat of Climate Chaos and Covid*. I don't know about you, but Covid has been tiring, climate change is frightening, and the Holy Spirit doesn't seem to be very involved in the battle against both.

As they are very good at doing, Christian Aid tells some individual stories as examples of both the problem, and of what can be done – I do encourage you to look at their website, and spend some time with the stories.

<https://www.christianaid.org.uk/appeals/key-appeals/christian-aid-week>

They take us to the East African country of Kenya, a place which is already being seriously affected by the effects of climate change, where once reliable and predictable rainfall has given way to prolonged periods of drought, broken with short intervals of intense rainfall, leading to flooding. This has caused widespread failure of crops, and brought hunger to communities that used to be well-fed. They tell the story of Rose, a grandmother looking after her grandchildren alone. She is one person who, in later life has come to know regular hunger that was never a problem in her younger days, and now she has the responsibility of caring for her grandchildren as well. In the periods of drought she is faced every morning with a long walk to obtain water for her family for the day, which is no fun on an empty stomach. Where is the Spirit of God at work in all this?

They have the video of Florence's story – do watch it, it's on the front page of our website. A widow, left with four children, living an hour's walk from the nearest water – and then Christian Aid helped fund a dam project. Now they have water on hand, a community garden, they can keep bees and make a bit extra selling the honey – and Florence sings as she gardens, sings as she walks, sings in worship – yes, the Holy Spirit is at work.



Too often we limit the power of the Spirit, too often we limit the sort of people who should receive it, too often we limit church to people like us. In Acts, Peter had to learn that the Spirit moves where it will, that it often alights on the people we didn't expect – and all we need to do is to keep our eyes open, we will see that God is at work.

The Christian Aid Week Prayer

by Bob Kikuyu Global Theology Advisor, Christian Aid

Great God,
 Who makes the sun to rise, and opens the heavens,
 Hear the cry of the people who sow in hope for rain,
 but reap only despair.
 Hear the cry of the people seeking shelter from the storm,
 their hopes and homes submerged.
 Hear the cry of the people,
 when creation is hitting back with rage and resistance.
 Give us hope, grant us salvation,
 Give us a new relationship with creation,
 With reverence to tend this gift from You
 And say once again of the earth and all you created
 It is GOOD.