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Easter 6B

Sermon notes on Acts 10

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In our psalm this morning we have heard an exuberant song of praise. Not many clues are given to us that we might know what the praise is for, but whatever it is it is said to be "marvellous", "a victory", reflecting God's "faithfulness", "mercy", and "equity in judgement". It's rich language, and although we have already sung it in worship this morning, it's worth asking the question about what it takes to be able to sing a song like this, and in fact actually to *mean* it. What does it take to *feel* the sentiment, rather simply to model it in music or in the way it is read? We tend to balk at the strength of the nastier sentiments expressed in the psalms; why is it different with the exuberance of such psalms as we've heard today? How might such language become *ours*? The answer, presumably, is that we ourselves experience such things of God as the original poet did. But what would that be *for us*? What is it that a God can do, which we could not do for ourselves? And how might it become ours?

In our reflections upon last week's reading from Acts we noted the extraordinary lengths God went to in order that the Ethiopian official would hear the gospel. We reflected that, if it is the case that each of us requires the same convoluted approach from God as he did, then the work of our coming to faith can only be something which a god could do. Only a god could weave the threads required to create the seamless garment of faith. Of course, the path God needs to take to get to us is not simply one like of contriving such a complicated sequence of events as we saw were necessary for the Ethiopian to come to faith. Our distance from God is not so much that we are out of reach, as it is that we are *in reach* of so many other things. God's getting to us is a matter of overcoming connections and constrictions which indicate the absence of God in our lives, and mute whatever praise we might be able to muster.

In this morning's reading from Acts we've heard another story of a conversion which required great obstacles to be overcome, only this time the barriers are found not so much in the distance of the convert from the bearer of God's message, but in the distance of the evangelist himself from understanding

God's intention. The story of the conversion of the Gentile Cornelius and his household is told with a great deal of detail because it constitutes an extraordinary development in the life of the people of God – the spilling over of the promises of God out of Israel and into the wider world.

As its beneficiaries, it is difficult for us to comprehend how large a shift this is. Perhaps if we could imagine who we would like least to inherit these buildings after we've finished with them, and to imagine that it was in fact God's will that just these people did inherit them, we might be in the realm of understanding the shock which Peter's encounter with Cornelius meant for the disciples of Jesus. Immediately following what we have heard, Peter is taken to task by other Jewish Christians for having gone to these Gentiles in the first place, and the matter finally has to go to a council of church leaders in Jerusalem to sort out what is to be required of Gentile converts as far as ritual and ethical observance is concerned.

But the important point is that what happened between Peter and Cornelius actually took place: perhaps *the* fundamental division in humanity, from the perspective of the Jews, was overcome. And the thing to note is that Peter (the Jew) is amazed! If anyone is going to be able to sing this morning's psalm, it will be Peter and those who experience similar things. What the psalmist speaks of as marvellous, a victory, reflecting God's faithfulness and mercy – all this points to the last of the reasons for praise we noted in the psalm: God's equity in judgement. God's great work is to set us all before him on a level playing field. His mercy is not to discard what is beyond the Pale but to gather it in. His faithfulness is that he finally brings the promised blessing to the nations through his people (cf. Gen 12.3), despite the fact that his people would ultimately not choose to be the conduit of such a blessing. His victory is that this happens despite the choices that either Jew or Gentile would make. God's great work is to declare that we stand under a common judgement, and share a common righteousness.

But, most importantly, it *is* the work of *God*. It is the Spirit of God who prepares Peter for the visitation from Cornelius, and the Spirit which blows open Peter's understanding of the possibilities of the gospel when it descended on Cornelius and his household. Peter simply responds in faith to God's leading, and God does the rest.

Yet, Protestant activists that we are, we stand under a greater temptation to make God's work into our own, to hear in the story of God's inclusion of the Gentiles only the imperative that *we* must be "inclusive" (to use the buzzword which currently applies here). Our love and welcome of the stranger is, indeed, an important part of Christian discipleship, but again we're in the realm of the difficultly God has in saving us. It is not easy to come to terms with what God has done. I suggested last week that, as we pray that God's word be heard by those whose souls hunger for it, we also pray upon ourselves challenge and change. The Jew-Gentile question doesn't go away with Cornelius, or with the later Jerusalem council, or perhaps ever since. That God should create of us one humanity is an extraordinary thing. And it is, surely, what we most earnestly desire. What would we give not to have spend hundreds of billions of dollars each year defending ourselves from people we call friends but deep down suspect might not be? What would we give not to have grounds for fear of those who are different?

Holocausts are *one* solution.

But the great thing *God* does, the salvation and healing he brings, is the thought of a new kind of humanity – one that is not based on defining ourselves *over against* each other but one which has to do with *mutual* definition. To borrow from some of the divisions St Paul notes (Galatians 3.28), no longer is it a matter of Jew against Gentile, but Jew for Gentile; nor male against female, nor slave against free, but the one for the other in such relationships.

This humanity is for us yet an imperfect work. Even in ourselves as church we see the divisions more often than we would like. But it has its beginning in the meeting of God and our humanity in Jesus of Nazareth, God himself standing not over against humanity but with it, in it and for it, and the man Jesus standing with, in and for God.

And as it was before the cross, so it continues after Easter: God is God *for* us, and not against us,

This is what we celebrate in our psalm this morning, for such a faithfulness in God to his own character and promises is what will finally bring us to him and to each other, whether we welcome it or resist. This being the case, our own efforts in welcoming the stranger are simply acts of testimony to what God is yet to complete – modest and imperfect acts but necessary, that the praise in the psalm might ever find more voices to carry it forth.

That God's reconciling work in Christ might, then, be ever more widely known, may his people become increasingly the sign and symbol of his reconciliation, and give him all due praise. Amen.