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Easter 5C

Sermon notes on
Revelation Acts 11.1-18
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The book of Acts is something we know as being more or less a “history” book, which is to say that its form lends itself very easily to being read as “what happened next”.¹ But thinking about the accounts simply as history doesn’t get us to the heart of the matter because what we are dealing with in *this* history is actually *theology* – perhaps indeed a theology of history but then much more than a matter of history in the sense of being an account simply of what happened next. Acts is history as an account of the *kind* of thing which would *necessarily* take place if it were the case that Jesus was risen from the dead. The New Testament – the Gospels, Acts, the letters and Revelation – is written against the background of an unflinching belief in the resurrection of Jesus, not simply as a thing which was now believed but as a thing which made a difference to the way we live and experience each other and the world. This is to say, then, that even though last week’s reading about Tabitha looked like it had more to do with the resurrection of Jesus than this week’s, in fact both have their source in the resurrection, and give *meaning* to what we say when we declare “Jesus is risen”.

We can see the difference between a mere historical account of what happens next and the *theological, resurrection-informed experience* of what happened in the details of our reading this morning. In particular, let’s look at the unexpected way in which Peter explains what happens in the house of Cornelius and why he did what he did.

The crisis, and the reason that Peter has to justify his actions, is that he seems to have transgressed the stringently observed boundaries between Jew and Gentiles; “Why did you go to uncircumcised men and eat with them?”, is the criticism he has to answer when he gets home.

From the moral and ethical vantage point of modern liberal western society it looks as if what Peter has done is “obviously” the right thing. For those who were present on Wednesday night, we can note that we are again in the realm of the question of what makes a human being – the

question of where a human being is to be found, of *who* is human, and who not, or to what *extent* someone is human and so how we ought to treat them. Our answer today is almost automatically to declare that “everyone” is a human being (tautological problems aside!), by which we mean that everyone should be treated equally, have the same rights, not be put down or otherwise mistreated, and so on. This is our moral outlook today, and it is all very good, if perhaps tending a little towards the utopian.

But the important thing to notice is that Peter does *not* offer a moral argument for his actions – something along the lines of “we are all human beings, aren’t we?” “all created in the image of God”, “all children of God”. This *our* way of speaking about reasons for ignoring racial, religious and other differences. Instead, Peter accounts for his actions by “blaming” *God*. Speaking of his vision of being commanded to eat unclean foods, he quotes God: “What *I* have made clean you must not declare profane” The reason for the breaking down of this barrier – that between Jew and Gentile – is not liberal ethics but divine command.

The point is, first, simply to note just how un-modern – how un-*us* – this is. Last week, as much for the entertainment of his parents as for their son, we hired and watched the recent animated movie “Planet 51”. This is the story of the way in which society deals with the arrival of an alien who didn’t realise the planet was inhabited, with the twist that the “alien” is a human astronaut and “Planet 51” is not earth but another planet populated by little green men (and women) who, apart from being little and green, are pretty much like us. Conveniently everyone speaks English, but the important point is that the whole thing is what we are so often served up in this kind of popular story telling. It is a *moral* tale about accepting those who are different.

As is often the case in these stories, the climax is when one of the less powerful little green men confronts the general of the little green men army with an impassioned plea for mercy and understanding for the alien (human being) he is persecuting, very much along the kinds of lines we would use today: can’t you see that he’s

¹ Luke even encourages this understanding in the way he describes what he is doing at the start of his gospel and then Acts.

really just like us, just taller and a kind of sickly pink colour.²

We're very familiar with this way of responding to exaggerations of human difference, but there is none of this in our Acts story. Peter doesn't know about the "brotherhood of man" or any such thing; "God made me do it" is the reason he gives for doing what we would consider simply to be the clear moral choice.

Now, there is nothing wrong with the moral ideals we have about everyone being equally human to everyone else, or with the associated imperatives to treat each other with dignity and so on. But let us note that that is not what the Acts text is about. The Cornelius incident is about what was thought to be a God-imposed distinction between Jew and Gentile being *overcome* by God. And so the resolution of the dispute back in Jerusalem is not, "Ah, yes, of course the Gentiles are people too! How foolish of us!" Rather, the Jewish Christians turn to the praise of God saying, "Then God has given *even* to the Gentiles the repentance that leads to life."

Now the *outcome* of all of this is, to us today, quite appropriate – there is finally an acceptance of Gentile believers into the fold of Jesus.³ But if we stay simply with the outcome of the story, what we are left with is not gospel but moral imperatives – "law": do and think as those first Jewish Christians learned to do and think, for God's love is for everyone.

Again there is nothing wrong with us telling each other that that is how we are to behave, but we need also to know the *extent* of what it is which is asked of us in the command, "love your neighbour as yourself." The Jewish Christians see that the matter requires the praise of God because they understand that it is a God-sized problem which has been overcome, in fact a problem which *only* God could overcome.

In the election of Abraham and Sarah as patriarch and matriarch of the people of God there is actually nothing to suggest that God's love for this people means God's hatred or exclusion of all other peoples. In fact, just the opposite is found in the covenant with Abraham:

² The moral plea – but doesn't work. Interestingly, what overcomes the persecution is the unwarranted, unexpected, even unasked for act of the human being in saving his "arch-enemy" from death.

³ We note, however, that the controversy continues on a different – the question of "how Jewish" a Gentile has to become once they have confessed faith in Jesus (Galatians 2f; Acts 15, etc.).

"through you will all peoples be blessed"⁴ But there had developed a very sharp distinction in the minds of the Jews by the time of Jesus, so that Peter could say to Cornelius, "You yourselves know that it is unlawful for a Jew to associate with or to visit a Gentile" (Acts 10.28).

This distinction had taken on God-proportions, and its violation was understood to have consequences for a person's standing before God (in terms of ritual cleanness). It doesn't go too far to say that, for pious Jews of the time, God *required* of them their self-isolation from Gentiles – it had become to be understood to be divinely instituted. And so it would have felt to Peter that God was changing God's rule here: God was contradicting what was being done *for the sake of God*.

And now we can see how this is an event which has to do with the resurrection of Jesus, and so with the power of God, and not simply with human ethics. The point of the crucifixion is that it is *for God's sake*, that Jesus is executed, because Jesus is perceived to be a threat to the religious safety of the people.

The resurrection, then, is God standing against God, *God in heaven contradicting the God in our hearts*, revealing that the two are not the same and that we are serving the wrong one.

When God pours out the Holy Spirit on the household of Cornelius the resurrection happens again, God raises the dead, only those who are raised are not only Cornelius, but Peter and, later, the other believers back in Jerusalem. These are raised in the sense we saw last week, drawing on St Paul, who describes this God as the one who gives life to the dead and calls into being that which did not exist. What "did not exist" for Peter and the other Jewish Christians was that God's work in Christ had anything to do with the Gentiles, for how *could* it?

But now that it did, a new beginning met with a new understanding and the dead were raised, eyes were opened, and God was glorified.

The point is that if we take away from the story of Peter and Cornelius only the message that God loves everyone and that we ought to too, then we render the story irrelevant because it tells us nothing we don't already know. Perhaps more importantly, this seems to imply that such love is actually *possible* – that we ought to be "able" to love each other, and usher in the kingdom.

But that the Jewish Christians praise God for what Cornelius experienced is a factor we must take with utter seriousness, for the implication is

⁴ Or, "will all peoples bless themselves", depending on the translation.

not simply that *we* should be loving and accepting of each other but that such love and acceptance *begins as a work of God*.

This being the case, we might also note that the rather modern notion of “love and acceptance” doesn’t really fit the story, or isn’t *rich* enough for the story. For the Gentiles are not given a mere welcome but a *repentance*: “... God has given even to the Gentiles the repentance that leads to life” (11.18).

So the love of God is that the *loved* are now free, or even “allowed”, to *change*. Their humanity is indeed recognised but so also its deficiencies; “*love*” is here *the possibility of repentance*.

So neither the Jews nor the Gentiles are the “good guys” here, or the victims. Borrowing again from Paul, *all* have fallen short of the glory of God – this is the *accusation*, the “bad news” of the gospel.

But the important thing is that the accusation is a diminishing echo which sounds after the “big bang” – the moment of creation – the act of grace which stands Peter and Cornelius and all they represent on an equal footing of being loved and accepted by God.

And so it is, as we sang in our opening hymn, that we *pray* that we might love, and see whatever love we might manage as an answer to prayer – the acts of today’s apostles, working out the logic of the resurrection of Jesus, to the glory of God.

For the benefit of all God’s people, may this prayer be ever on our lips, and find its answer in the faithfulness of the God who keeps his promises by making it possible for us to love one another.

Amen.