

I read a story about Sandra, who is a single Christian woman who works as a geography schoolteacher in New York. One summer she decided to travel across America and see the sights she had taught her school children about, and so she set out on her journey travelling alone in her campervan. One afternoon in the middle of nowhere with nothing but cactuses on the horizon, the water pump on her van packed up. She was tired, scared and alone. Despite the occasional passing car, no one seemed interested in stopping to help her. Leaning up against her campervan she prayed: *Please God, send me an angel and preferably one with mechanical experience.* Within minutes a huge Harley Davidson motorbike stopped by her, and an enormous man with long hair, a beard and tattoos jumped off. He walked slowly towards Sandra and without even glancing at her he went to work on the van. Within a few minutes he had the water pump out and was repairing it.

The intimidated schoolteacher was too dumbfounded to speak; especially when she read the words on the back of his leather jacket: *Hell's Angels-California.* He finally refitted the working water pump and started the van for her. She finally managed to stammer: *Thanks so much!* Noticing her surprise at the whole ordeal, the man looked her straight in the eye and mumbled: ***Don't judge a book by its cover. You may not know who you're talking to.*** Without another word, he smiled and straddled his motorbike and with a wave, he was gone as fast as he had appeared. My first response on reading that story was when people pray for an angel, they should be more specific about the type of angel they need. My second thought was about a story that comes from our Bible.

Cornelius was a Roman Centurion who commanded a hundred soldiers. Acts 10 states that he was God fearing, although not yet a Christian.

He sincerely and fervently sought God but Cornelius had some unanswered questions. And then Peter entered his story. We should remember that Peter was among the first Christian converts and he would have still practiced Jewish traditions. All of the disciples at this time would have maintained their Jewish practices. Peter had accepted Jesus as Lord but being brought up as a Jew, much of his perspective was still Jewish. Peter saw the Christian religion as being reserved for the Jews since they were God's chosen people. We tend to forget that the first Christians were Jews, but back to the story.

Peter had been on a journey and he came to rest at the house of Simon the Tanner. About midday Peter went to the top of the house to pray, where he fell into a trance. Let's look at the trance from a literal perspective, and then look beneath the story for what it might mean. We should remember that Jews had strict dietary laws. Peter saw the heavens opened and something like a large sheet descending from heaven and it contained all kinds of animals, reptiles and birds. A voice from heaven said to Peter: *Get up, kill and eat*. Peter was shocked and he shouted: *I cannot eat anything which is unclean!* The voice replied: *What God has created, do not call unclean*. This happened three times and the vision ended.

Peter probably wondered what the vision was about. About this time, the passage tells us that three men representing Cornelius the Centurion approached the Tanner's house, and requested to see Peter. These representatives told Peter about their leader Cornelius who up to this point hadn't been introduced to Christ. He was a Gentile but he was searching for the truth. The representatives asked Peter to come and meet Cornelius, who was a man of prayer, righteous and God-Fearing and respected by many Jews. This must have been quite a surprising request, why would a Roman officer, and a gentile to boot, want to meet Peter?

But because Peter was listening to God and acting accordingly, a new era is about to be ushered in for the Christian faith. The next morning, Peter and the representatives went to Caesarea where Cornelius was waiting expectantly for them. He'd gathered his family and friends for the occasion and as they greeted Peter, he began to feel uncomfortable. Jews were not to associate with Gentiles much less visit with them. And then Peter remembers his vision: ***How can I call anything that God creates unclean. This isn't just about food, it's about people!*** Peter realised that the supposed *unclean animals* represented the non Jews, and suddenly God is no longer just the God of the Jews, but of Gentiles as well. This new reality must have been really difficult for Peter, not to mention how humbling it must have been for his proud Jewish heritage. And yet how tremendous it was that this disciple was open to the new truth about God.

And Peter's awareness presented him with an opportunity to share the Gospel with his newfound friend and equal. Peter forgot any religious barriers and tells Cornelius about Jesus, his baptism and his healing ministry, his crucifixion and resurrection. And as the Gospel is being presented, the Holy Spirit pours out onto the Gentiles and they began praising God together, speaking in unknown languages and singing praises. Peter now realized what his vision had been about: ***God shows no favourites! All people can be baptized Christians.*** Peter then remained with Cornelius and his family for some days. This was the beginning of taking the Gospel message of Christ to all people, this was literally a new era in Christianity. Later Saul, a Pharisee and persecutor of Christians, would become Paul the Apostle who took the Gospel to the entire Gentile nations. What an amazing story!

Verse 34 of Acts 10 records Peter saying: *I realise how true it is that God does not show favouritism, but accepts people from every nation who fear God and do what is right.*

We may listen to this statement and think it's no big deal, but consider Peter's statement against the fact that it was not until 1919 that women had the vote, and it took until the 1960s before Civil Rights Legislation was passed. Although God doesn't show favouritism it seems that we do. How slow we are to learn from God! We have no excuses, today or yesterday, for the way we treat people who are different from us.

But we all have our own Gentiles don't we? We may not deliberately hurt them but we select our group and consider ourselves to be right from time to time? Imagine for a moment the flack that Peter would have received for baptizing this Roman foreigner? Do you think his fellow Jewish Christians welcomed this? They would have thought Peter had a lot of explaining to do: How dare he! Imagine the courage it must have taken Peter to stand up for God and do what was right, not what was popular and polite.

There have been a few Peter's in history. One of my favourites is William Wilberforce who stood virtually alone in England as he tried to bring in legislation banning the slave trade. He demonstrated true Christianity and he faced personal attacks from his opponents. They slandered him and spread false rumours about him; they said he was a violent husband which he was not. Some said he had a mistress which was another lie. Wilberforce did right and paid dearly. Abraham Lincoln fought against slavery when he was the American President and he was hated and eventually assassinated. He was murdered by prejudice.

In recent history, Martin Luther King promoted a campaign of non violent equality. Again, he was subjected to incredible injustices. Do you know that Martin Luther King wrote most of his sermons from a jail cell. Yet he was quoted as saying: *Love is the force capable of transforming an enemy into a friend.* And although he too was murdered by prejudice, that doesn't detract from the truth of this statement.

So let's ask ourselves: *Who are our Gentiles?* It's a universal question that can be asked of everyone throughout our world. Who are our Gentiles? Why can't we learn what Peter learned in his dream; that God is no respecter of persons and that God's love is extended to all.

Dr. Anthony Campolo tells of a pastor friend of his who lives in Manhattan. Every morning, this pastor would have breakfast at a little diner downtown. And every morning, he would see the same crowd who also started their day at that diner. One day this pastor walked into the diner and introduced himself to the crowd, then asked everyone there to also introduce themselves to each other. He was just hoping for a more friendly atmosphere in the place. It worked for everyone but the owner. All he would reveal of himself was that his name was Harry. After a few weeks all the regular customers had become friends and the pastor pressured Harry to reveal a little more about himself. Harry reluctantly announced that his real name was Hazim and that he was from Iraq. Now this was during the time when Saddam Hussein was a real threat to world security. The majority of his customers were Jewish, and tensions between Arabs and Jews were running high. All the customers in the diner froze when Harry announced his national origin.

The next morning, as the pastor was getting ready, he heard a radio report that the United States and Britain had begun bombing Baghdad. The pastor ran to diner to meet Harry before he opened that morning because he wanted to reassure the man of his support. As the pastor came round the corner he saw the diner regulars waiting for Harry. When Harry arrived all the customers surrounded him with hugs and words of encouragement and the pastor prayed over all of them. After the prayer, Harry said gruffly: You still have to pay for the doughnuts but from now on the coffee will always be free!

Who are your Gentiles? Is there anyone you view with suspicion because they are somehow different from you? *What God has created, do not call unclean.* Let us learn from Peter's experience with Cornelius and learn that nothing that comes from God is unclean! **Amen**

*(1748 words)*