

I was talking last week about the importance of identity. We love to cling to our identities, and they almost become labels by which we define ourselves. I've spoken of this before and I believe that the only identity we require is that of Christian, for God's priority is for the people of Christ. For some that's not enough and they need to belong to something tangible like a church or denomination. However, we are people of Christ first and everything else is secondary. Our passage from Acts 10, which tells of the conversion of the Roman Centurion Cornelius and his family, clearly demonstrates that God doesn't care about what we were, only who we are now. God doesn't play favourites!

When C S Lewis, the Christian author was a small boy, he announced to his father: *Dad, I'm prejudiced against the French.* His father asked why? *If I knew that* replied the precocious youngster; *it wouldn't be a prejudice!* He was right because prejudice is always about pre-judging something or someone. Prejudice is what happens when someone makes up their mind despite knowing the facts about someone or something. Bad historians, clever politicians and lazy theologians do this all the time, and people did this in Biblical times too.

Many Jews told stories about the wicked things that the Gentiles did. One of the reasons some Jews gave for not eating in non-Jewish house was because Gentiles stored their household waste under their floorboards. In the same way, Gentiles were taught that Jews were posh unsociable people because they wouldn't eat pork, which was the cheapest meat available. The Jews didn't help these prejudices because they did think they were better their Gentile neighbours. Whenever one group of people think they're better than the other then prejudices are sure to rise. And it's against a background of prejudice that we encounter Paul and Peter in Acts 10. Remember that Paul was a Pharisee before his conversion experience on the road to Damascus.

Paul would have been supportive of Jews keeping their traditions and customs. Paul firmly believed that Mosaic law, which contains Jewish food laws and keeping the Sabbath. He believed that the Law was God's word to Israel and should be respected as such. But Paul and the other Apostles are equally clear that in the light of Jesus Christ; this Jewish law was only considered God's word for a particular people of a particular period and for a particular purpose. Jesus Christ had freed people from the Law. However, the Jewish backgrounds of both Peter and Paul still informed their prejudices!

A female college lecturer was driving down to Oxford to do some research. She was travelling alone and was a crowded M6 when her car broke down causing a traffic jam. The water pump in her car seized and despite the traffic jam she caused, no one wanted to help her, and she wasn't in the AA or RAC. Leaning up against her car, she prayed, *Please God help me, send me an angel. Preferably one with mechanical experience!* Within minutes, a loud motorbike drew up and an enormous man with long hair, beard and tattooed arms walked up to her and asked her what the problem was. The lecturer explained and he went to work, and within minutes the car was going again. The intimidated lecturer was both delighted and terrified, because she wondered what this huge biker may want from her in return. As he put down the bonnet, she mumbled *thanks so much*. Noticing her discomfort, the biker looked her straight in the eye and said; ***Don't judge a book by its cover. You may not know who you're talking to.*** With a smile, he got on his bike and he was gone as fast as he had appeared. The lecturer had reacted to her prejudices, just like the story from Acts 10.

Cornelius was a Roman Centurion who commanded 100 soldiers. The Scripture states that he was *a God-fearing man* although he was not yet a believer in Christ. He sincerely and fervently sought God and God's ways but Cornelius had some unanswered questions. Then Peter enters the story, and we must remember that although Peter was a Christian, he still practiced Jewish traditions.

He had accepted Jesus Christ, but because of his upbringing, much of his perspective was still Jewish. In fact, Peter saw Christianity as reserved for the Jews since they were God's chosen people. Peter would have been informed by his Jewish traditions. The passage tells us that three men representing Cornelius requested to see Peter, and they told Peter about their leader and they asked Peter to meet Cornelius, who was a man of prayer, righteous and God-Fearing and respected by many Jews. The next morning, Peter and the representatives journeyed to Caesarea where Cornelius was expecting them. He had gathered his family and friends for this occasion and as they met, Peter began to feel uncomfortable. Jews were not to associate with Gentiles much less visit with them. Then God breaks into Peter heart and mind and he asks himself: *How can I call anything that God creates unclean?*

God challenges Peter's prejudices and Peter realised that the Jewish law is not just about dietary rules; it's about people! The supposed *unclean animals* represent the Gentiles: Suddenly God is no longer just the God of the Jews. How difficult that reality must have been for Peter and how humbling, and yet how tremendous it was that the disciple was open to this truth. What's more, Peter realises that God has given him the opportunity to share the Gospel with his newfound friend and equal. Peter forgets any religious barriers and tells Cornelius about Jesus, his baptism, his healing ministry; his crucifixion and resurrection. And as the Gospel is being presented, the Holy Spirit pours out onto the Gentiles and they begin praising God and speaking in unknown languages.

Peter now realized what his vision had been about. God shows no favourites and even the Gentiles could be baptized as Christians. This was the beginning of the witnessing about Christ to all people, and not exclusively to the Jews. This was literally a new era in Christianity. ***Acts 10: 34. Then Peter began to speak, 'I now realize how true it is that God does not show favouritism, but accepts people from every nation who fear God and do what is right.***

The Apostle Luke recorded this statement around 75AD. Yet still we struggle to learn from this basis truth: *I now realize how true it is that God does not show favouritism, but accepts people from every nation who fear God and do what is right.* This is not a hard verse for us to understand, it doesn't contain some clever hidden meaning but evidently, we are so slow to learn from it.

We all have our Gentiles, don't we? Those people who are not quite equal to ourselves. We think our group or race or denomination are the chosen ones, don't we? Just imagine the criticism Peter would have received for baptizing this Roman foreigner? Other Jewish Christians would have been horrified and asked Peter to explain himself. What courage it must have taken to obey God and do what was right, and not what was popular and routine.

Chuck Swindoll in his book *Simple Faith*, writes about William Wilberforce who stood virtually alone in England, as he attempted to first block slave-trading and ban slavery. He demonstrated true Christianity and his enemies slandered him for it. They spread vicious false rumours saying he was a wife beater when he was not. They said he was secretly married to another woman which was another lie! He did what was right by God but it cost him his life and he died a broken man in 1833, one year before the abolition of slavery in 1834.

When Martin Luther King began to promote his vision of nonviolent equality, many prejudiced people subjected him to incredible injustices. After King's assassination, some of the persecutions King endured came to light. His home had been bombed. He lived for years under constant death threats. He was falsely slandered. He was jailed more than twenty times: Yet he was quoted as saying, *Love is the force capable of transforming an enemy into a friend.*

Who are our Gentiles? May we learn what Peter learned; that God is no respecter of persons and that God's love is extended to all.

As we begin a new session and as I come to begin the fourth year of my ministry here in Thornliebank, I wonder what the next year will bring. If we are to continue to build God's church in terms of our own discipleship and faith, as well as build our congregation by welcoming others into our family of faith; it seems like a good time to ask ourselves: *Who are our Gentiles?* May each of us pray and ask God to reveal the answer, and then keep in our minds and hearts the words of Peter: ***I now realize how true it is that God does not show favouritism, but accepts people from every nation who fear God and do what is right.***

In the story of the Centurion from Acts 10, God is teaching us that He has no favourites. We are God's creatures, everything that comes from God is worthy of love! **Amen**

Lets Pray:

(1590 words)