

STANDING IN GOD'S WAY (Lindfield 19th May 2019)

ACTS 11:1-18

How did you feel when, as a child, you were caught doing something wrong and were sent to the Principal's office? The anticipation of what she or he might say or do was often worse than the reality. Or if mother said, "Wait until your Father gets home" – the anticipated confrontation was often worse than the reality. I wonder if that's how Peter felt when he returned to Jerusalem with all these exciting stories but was criticised by the leaders. Notice what they're angry about. Not that he preached to them or told them about Jesus, not that he entered Cornelius's house but that he had lunch with him and his household. Cornelius was a wealthy man so his household would have included slaves, women and children.

If we think back to the Gospel stories that was the criticism levelled at Jesus. "Why does your Master eat with these tax collectors and sinners?" When he coaxed Zacheus to come down from the tree he said, "I must come to your house today." In Jewish culture hospitality was very significant. Inviting someone into your home and offering them a meal was a sign of acceptance and inclusion. Guests were under the protection of the host. It was treating them as a family member for that brief period.

Peter was accused. *You went into the house of uncircumcised men and ate with them.* The inference being that he would have eaten food that was not kosher – that was "unclean, forbidden". Jesus was accused of the same thing. Jesus was accused of breaking many of the ritual laws – the laws given to Israel but not to be applicable in the New Covenant. The Kingdom of God that Jesus came to inaugurate was not made up of these kinds of rules and regulations. Jesus, in his life, fulfilled and completed all that the Old Testament Laws were pointing to. They were now no longer to be applied. They had fulfilled their purpose. The Kingdom of God in the New Era, or under the New Covenant was one of grace and faith rather than law.

So Peter relates the entire story. He goes back to his meeting with Cornelius in Chapter 10: How God lead him to Joppa, to Cornelius's house. After Cornelius explains how God spoke to him and told him to find Peter and bring him home, Peter realises, ***in truth I am grasping that God is no respecter of appearances (usually translated "persons"). Rather, in every nation, the one who fears (worships, obeys) God and acts righteously is acceptable to God*** (Acts 10:34-35) and then the vision of the sheet with all kinds of food. Peter's refusal to eat but then God's declaration, *Do not call anything impure that God has made clean.* This happened 3 times. Think of the significance of that. 3 X denial, 3 X restoration now 3 X the declaration of inclusion.

Peter rightly concluded, “so if God gave them the same gift he gave us who believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I to think that I could stand in God’s way?” (Acts 11:17) Fortunately his detractors were convinced. The matter won’t finally be settled until the Council of Jerusalem in Ch. 15 but is now understood by many others.

God, through this event with Peter has turned the religious world upside down! Religion is now no longer based on location or culture. Religion is now no longer based on appearances – outward signs like ritual hand washing or what you eat. Religion – our relationship with God is now only based on faith and putting that faith into practice day to day. Why can we not hear this amazing story? Why does it not inform our daily relationships with other religions, with people who are not like us? The answer to that is unfortunately simple: because we do not believe the fact that “God is no respecter of appearances”.

When we deny the Sacrament to someone who is gay, or we deny Ordination to someone because of their gender, we deny this truth. When we condemn people to hell because of who they are we deny this truth. (I have written to Israel Folau to try and point that out to him).

God has declared it all clean. The food, the people. God is no respecter of appearances. This doesn’t mean there are no standards or ways of living we should respect and aim to achieve. In fact the standard is much higher. Righteousness is not based on appearances but rather what is in the heart. Attitude is more important than actions. People can keep the rules and appear righteous but if they harbour hatred in their hearts it does them no good.

In the Parable of the Good Samaritan many of the Jews would have been in complete sympathy with the priest for not touching the man bleeding by the side of the road because he would have then been unclean and unable to attend to his duties in the Temple. Yet in God’s eyes helping this man in need would not have made the priest unclean, it would have shown God’s love most dramatically. God is no respecter of appearances.

In the Gospels we see that this New Covenant, the Kingdom Jesus came to inaugurate, was going to be very different. In Acts we see it unfurling and in these early years we see just how radically different it is. It completely changes the way we understand God, other religions, other people and ourselves in

relation to them all. Let us try and understand what it means that God is no respecter of appearances but not only understand but put into practice.

AMEN
