

These are the last verses of Chapter 10 in Acts – more fully called *the acts of the apostles*. The whole chapter is filled with challenges about changes to what is and who is acceptable. I'll later relate the same sorts of challenges to our lives.

Cornelius, a Roman officer over 100 men, a centurion. Has a vision to send for Peter (the one we have been studying up to Easter time) and bring him from Joppa, a coastal town on the Mediterranean. Meanwhile, while the servants are travelling to where Peter is staying, Peter has a vision of all kinds of animals and is told by God, not once but 3 times to eat. Each time Peter refuses because he knows the cleanliness and dietary laws of the Jewish people. He does get the point about a new definition of uncleanness compared with his Jewish heritage. Immediately after the dream the servants of the centurion arrive and demand Peter come with them.

I've just realised what a frightening situation this would be for Peter but he is assured by the servants that the Centurion is a good man.

It takes a day for Peter and the servants to get to Caesarea, another coastal town.

Peter speaks of what he knows

Acts 10

*Then Peter began to speak: "I now truly understand that God does not show favouritism, but welcomes those from every nation who fear Him and do what is right. He has sent this message to the people of Israel, proclaiming the gospel of peace through Jesus Christ, who is Lord of all. You yourselves know what has happened throughout Judea, beginning in Galilee with the baptism that John proclaimed: how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power, and how Jesus went around doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, because God was with Him.*

*We are witnesses of all that He did, both in the land of the Jews and in Jerusalem. And although they put Him to death by hanging Him on a tree, God raised Him up on the third day and caused Him to be seen—not by all the people, but by the witnesses God had chosen beforehand, by us who ate and drank with Him after He rose from the dead. And He commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that He is the One appointed by God to judge the living and the dead. All the prophets testify about Him that everyone who believes in Him receives forgiveness of sins through His name."*



Now we have set the scene for the challenge that comes in verses 44 to 48 which are the verses suggested for today. The Jewish believers saw the Holy Spirit fall on people who were non-Jews. Peter had already been convinced that there was a new revelation that not all that was previously unholy had remained unholy. He argued that there was no reason that these new believers should not be baptised.

What a setting- it's important that the locations were mentioned. Otherwise they would not have been mentioned. Caesarea, as a new city, a Roman resort town, couldn't be less Jewish. This would be the place where traditional Jews would feel most uncomfortable. But Peter is saying 'this is the new normal', Gentiles are welcome in the movement and we can mix with them.

You might say, *But what about Pentecost*, it was a gathering of Jews in the Jewish capital even though the Jews came from a variety of nations and spoke many different languages. Don't forget next week for Pentecost to wear bright colours,- red orange yellow.

Matthew's gospel ends with the instruction to go into all the nations so it's not a new concept. This story is symbolically laden even if we didn't realise it. Previously converts had been pressured to become more like Jews to be Christians. The men would need to be circumcised on commitment to Christ.

And so one of the greatest schisms of the early church began.

There were fundamentalist-oriented believers, even then, insisted on upholding what they saw as God's infallible command and accused the others of watering down scripture's demands. The others, in turn, argued that the love and compassion shown in Christ ought to be the measure and whatever did not cohere with it, whether in scripture or not, should be set aside. Am I describing the range of views now? No! These are First Century followers who came to be known as 'Christians'.

In other places in the New Testament authors reflect a range of approaches, the more radical stance of Paul, who declares the Christian no longer to be under the biblical law, and even more radically, the author of John's gospel, to the more conservative Matthew and Luke, who insists all biblical laws must be kept with the sole exception of those set aside by divine intervention, as in the vision he describes Peter seeing. Compassion had to win. It had always won in Jesus' ministry and in his disputes about what mattered most in scripture and its laws.

And to quote from Bill Loader. *Behind this passage is not only the celebration that gentiles equally matter to God, but the deeper reality that in the name of this God no discrimination against other human beings based on race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, age, or sinfulness has a place. In a secular world where most nations give at least lip service to human rights for all, people in the church sometimes lag behind and at worst perpetuate the very thing which Jesus lived and died to undermine, but that struggle in Christianity began already in its first decades.*

Luckily for us, Gentiles were accepted into the church. At least lucky for those of us from a non-Jewish background. Much of what we learn in church helps us understand if Christianity is a modified form of Jewishness. I challenge you to consider what, in particular, sets Christianity aside? What is the fresh revelation of Jesus, his life, death and resurrection?

When in exile in Babylon even Jews struggled with their Jewishness in a subordinate culture. *How can we sing the Lord's song in a strange land?*

The bible provided many examples of Gentiles coming to God. Ruth, a Moabite, became the great-grandmother of King David. Solomon had gentile wives. (Is that a wise thing? I tried it once.) Jonah is sent twice to Nineveh and the huge foreign city turns to God.

Right through church history there have been moves to maintain purity in the church and that will exclude some category of sinners or races or beliefs. I was watching *Les Misérables* and Fantine, Cosette's mother, is ejected from the workplace as she has a bastard child and therefore could pollute the explicitly Christian workplace.

Another example comes from our own congregation, thankfully from long ago, with un-named people that almost all of you won't remember, when someone on the welcoming team said that he would never shake hands with a homosexual. (He actually did not realise that he had done so many times) but the point is that he would exclude them.

Unmarried mothers, unmarried partners, divorcees, injecting drug users, homeless, gamblers, Collingwood followers. Where do we draw the line? As a church do we have a policy? Our old, longer Mission Statement helps inform our non-existent stated policy on who's in and who's out.

### ***Mission Statement 2016***

Eden Congregation of the Uniting Church aims:

To welcome, encourage and affirm *each other* in love.

We commit to expressing the Grace of God, who first cared for us,  
in prayer, preparation and in transforming acts of faith and service.

We acknowledge God accepts us where we are in our journeys but loves us too much to  
leave us there.

The message in the short passage we read where Peter pleads for the people that all can see have received God's Holy Spirit.

“Is there evidence that God's Spirit is active among the people on the other side?

If “Yes”. Then pull down the barricades and welcome them.”

Our tendency as humans is to hang about with people like us. The '*others*' are hard work. How can we overcome this natural, unconscious process?

There are lots of passages, mainly Jesus speaking, about sorting who's in and who's out. Think of sheep and goats, grain and chaff, last week was fruitful and non-bearing branches. All of these, and especially, the wheat and the tares leave God as the judge. Our job, as individuals and collectively, is to delay judgement and show acceptance and love.

A corollary of this or outcome would be that we expect difference, there will be challenges as we are not insulating ourselves from each other or the world. Each conflict can be regarded as an opportunity to demonstrate love, seek resolution while acknowledging difference and seeing all this as a public witness.