

Armagh Baptist Church
Sunday 29th November 2009 - 11:00am
Acts 10:23-48 – ‘The Gospel is Preached to the Gentiles’

Introduction

Last Sunday morning we looked at the first half of Acts ch.10 where we were shown in some detail how God was at work in the heart of two individuals - Cornelius the Roman Centurion and Peter the Leader of the Apostles. We saw first of all in vs.1-8:

1. A Sincere Seeker who was heard by God

The sincere seeker after God was Cornelius (v.1)
He lived in Caesarea, a Roman fortified City on the coast, 30 miles north of Joppa. He was a Centurion in the Italian Regiment, which was stationed there. As a Centurion he would have been a soldier with authority over 100 men. He was obviously a Gentile, quite possibly coming from Italy itself. And yet, we are told that he and his family were devout people and God-fearing! (v.2)
Cornelius was sincerely seeking after God. He had never yet heard the Gospel of Jesus Christ, but his prayers had been heard by God, and his gifts to the poor had not gone un-noticed by God either (Acts 10:4).
He was a sincere seeker who was heard by God.
But then we also saw in vs.9-23...

2. A Prejudiced Preacher who was changed by God

The prejudiced preacher was the Apostle Peter (v.9)
God had chosen Peter to be his instrument to bring the Gospel to the Gentiles in this chapter. Just as he had used him to preach the Gospel to the Jews in Acts ch.2, and to the Samaritans in Acts ch.8, now he was again going to use Peter to preach the Good News of Jesus Christ to another major people-group – The Gentiles: Cornelius and his friends and family in **Acts ch.10:23-48**.
Before Peter would finish preaching his sermon, the Holy Spirit would fall upon that gathering and many Gentiles would be ushered into the Kingdom of God! But we saw last week how God had to use a vision of a large sheet coming down from heaven filled with all kinds of animals, birds and reptiles to change Peter's mind as far as clean and unclean food was concerned, and also to change his mind as far as his view of unclean people was concerned too!
For centuries the Jews had adhered strictly to the OT Food Laws from Leviticus. The fact that they didn't eat 'unclean' meat set them apart from all the other nations of the world – the Gentiles. But the fact that the Gentiles did eat all of these unclean foods, meant that the Jews regarded the Gentiles themselves as unclean, and wouldn't even enter their homes, or share a meal with them. God had to teach Peter in Acts 10:15 not to '*call anything impure or unclean that God had made clean.*' And so in one sweep God not only set aside the Food Laws of the OT, so that we don't have to keep them anymore,

but he also made it clear to Peter that he should now go and enter the home of Cornelius, and preach the Gospel to these Gentiles for the first time.

So when men arrived at his door in Joppa saying that they had:

'Come from Cornelius the centurion, [who was] a righteous and God-fearing man, who [was] respected by all the Jewish people. [And that] a holy angel [had] told him to have [Peter] come to his house so that he could hear what [he had] to say.'

Peter immediately '*invited the men into the house to be his guests.*' (v.23)

So now it's the next day, and Peter begins to make the 30 mile journey north along the coast with these 3 men, all the way from Joppa to Caesarea. Notice in v.23 that '*some of the brothers from Joppa went along*' with them! I wonder why they tagged along? Were they there to make sure Peter didn't do anything stupid? Were they going along as minders for Peter? Were they going to keep an eye on him? Or were they also convinced that Peter (as a Jew) should now take the Gospel to the Gentiles? Maybe they were curious to see what God was going to do?

Well they must have had an overnight stay along the way, because it was the following day by the time they got to Caesarea (v.24). Cornelius has been expecting them – and what's more he has gathered up quite an audience for Peter to preach to! He had called together all his relatives and close friends. So Cornelius, although not saved himself yet, is concerned that all the people he cares about get the same chance to hear the Gospel as he does!

So in v.25 Peter enters a Gentile house *for the first time in his life!*

I'm sure he is in fear and trepidation. I'm sure he has many mixed feelings about it. He's really being stretched out of his comfort zone at this point. And yet no sooner is he through the door than Cornelius falls at his feet in reverence! What a way for a prejudiced Jew to be greeted by a Gentile!! But Peter tells Cornelius to stand up for '*I am only a man myself.*' Peter wasn't the one to be worshipped. Jesus alone deserves our homage, so he tells Cornelius to get up. This was an awkward moment, so we can tell that both men are quite nervous about this whole encounter. But as they talk together in v.27 they begin to relax in each other's company, and when Peter is led on inside the house he finds to his amazement a large gathering of people!

Now Peter has to get something of his chest – he has to clear the air in v.28:

'You are well aware that it is against our law for a Jew to associate with a Gentile or to visit him. But God has shown me that I should not call any man impure or unclean. So when I was sent for, I came without raising any objection. May I ask why you sent for me?' (v.28-29)

Notice that Peter has made quite a jump in his mind from v.15 to v.28. In v.15 God said to him, 'Do not call **anything** impure that God has made clean.' But by v.28 he has made the application of that principle, not to things, or to food, but to people! 'God has shown me that I should not call **any man** impure or unclean.' So he has got the point - he has learned his lesson well!

So now that he has been prepared by God to be there in this Gentile home, he wants to know why they sent for him (v.29).

Cornelius tells us the background to it all in vs.30-33.

It had taken exactly 4 days from the time of his vision of the angel, in order to get Peter to come to his home. But those 4 days not only dramatically changed Peter, but they were about to dramatically change the world!

'It was good of you to come' (v.33) 'Now we are all here in the presence of God' (even in a Gentile home) 'to listen to everything the Lord has commanded you to tell us.'

What an amazing opportunity for the Gospel! Peter begins to speak in v.34. In this chapter we have already seen:

1. A Sincere Seeker who was heard by God (vs.1-8) and....

2. A Prejudiced Preacher who was changed by God (vs.9-23)

Now we are going to see...

3. A Splendid Sermon which was interrupted by God (v.34-44)

Peter begins by talking about something which he himself had just realised: 'That God does not show favouritism, but accepts [people] from every nation who fear him and do what is right.' (v.35) – What a breakthrough for Peter! He was preaching about something that had just dawned on his heart. This was fresh; this was bang up to date. The penny had just dropped for him. He *should* have got it when Jesus had said those words to him and the other disciples on the mountain before he ascended into heaven in Matt 28:19-20: 'All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples... (of the Jews?- NO!) ...**of all nations**, baptising them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age!'

But they didn't get it!

Why was it so hard for Jewish background believers to hear that?

Why were they so blinkered? Jesus had said it, as clear as a bell –

The Gospel was for **all nations**, but they were happily keeping it to themselves! But then are we any better? – the Gospel is for all men in this country, but we've kept it to ourselves for too long. We need to get it out!

And when we do, we will be amazed at how ready people are to respond to it!

So Peter moves on from something he has just learned, to talk about things that even these people as Gentiles would have known something about. He starts with what they know, and then moves on to things they would not yet have heard of. What did they already know? Two things in v.36 and 37:

(v.36) – '**You know the message God sent to the people of Israel, telling the good news of peace through Jesus Christ, who is Lord of all.**'

1. The Birth of Jesus: God's message to the people of Israel was first of all one of **peace with God through Jesus Christ**. It's good news, but it's not just for the people of Israel, because Jesus is in fact '**Lord of all**'. So this was for the Gentiles too! And let's not forget, all of us here this morning I presume are Gentiles, we are not Jewish by birth – So **we** can know peace with God through the Lord Jesus Christ, as well as the Jews. Peace with God involves having our sins forgiven, because that's what has caused the rift between us and God in the first place. That's why we are enemies of God, because of our sin. But through Jesus Christ we can know peace with God. This is the message that was first announced on that first Christmas 2000 years ago: The Angels announced it to the shepherds in the fields above Bethlehem in Luke 2:14 - '**Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to [all] men on whom his favour rests.**'

Then Simeon in the Temple took the child Jesus in his arms and said this in Luke 2:29 - '**Sovereign Lord, as you have promised, you now dismiss your servant in peace. (Why?) For my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the sight of all people, a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel.**'

So the message of peace with God through Jesus Christ our Lord was announced not just to Israel, but to the Gentile world as well, right from the birth of Jesus at least 35 years earlier. And yet it was coming to Cornelius' home that day as if it was new! Anybody, from any background, from any nationality, can know peace with God through faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. That is the good news that Cornelius' family heard for the first time that day. That is the good news that we need to hear this morning, and that is the good news that this whole world still needs to hear in our day and generation. Men and women can know peace with God their Maker simply through putting their faith in the Lord Jesus Christ.

But what else would these people in Cornelius' home have known that day? Well Peter goes on to say in v.37:

'You know what has happened throughout Judea, beginning in Galilee after the baptism that John preached – how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and power, and how he went around doing good and healing all who were under the power of the devil, because God was with him.'

These people would have known *something* of the events that had taken place around them in the last few years in the regions of Judea and Galilee. Where they lived in Caesarea they were only 25 miles from Galilee, and only 60 miles from Jerusalem, so they certainly would have heard about...

2. The Life of Jesus

Perhaps they had heard of John the Baptist – baptising so many people in the Jordan. Perhaps they would even have heard of one person in particular who had been baptised by him – Jesus of Nazareth. How the Holy Spirit had descended on him like a dove as he came up out of the water.

This symbolised that this person, Jesus of Nazareth, was someone specially owned by God. In fact he was endowed with power from on high from that moment onwards, because over the following 3 years he had gone about doing good and healing all who were under the power of the devil.

He was able to bring healing to many, he was able to open the eyes of the blind, he was able to cause the deaf to hear, and he was even able to raise the dead to life! He had been able to cast out many demons from those who were possessed by the devil. His power was greater than all demonic forces. This was proof that God was with Him. This was proof that Jesus had come from God! These Gentiles living in Caesarea had surely heard all about this, perhaps that's why they were so well-disposed towards the Jewish people, perhaps that's why they were so God-fearing, perhaps that's why they were openly searching for God.

Well, as an Apostle, Peter had been appointed and sent out to bear witness to all of this. The qualification necessary to be an Apostle according to Acts 1:22 was that you had to have been an eye-witness of Jesus *'beginning from John's baptism to the time when Jesus was taken up from' them* into heaven. An Apostle had to be a witness of his resurrection.

So that's what Peter goes on to talk about in v.39-41:

'We are witnesses of everything he did in the country of the Jews and in Jerusalem. They killed him by hanging him on a tree, but God raised him from the dead on the third day and caused him to be seen. He was not seen by all the people, but by witnesses whom God had already chosen – by us who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead.'

Here Peter talks not just about the life and ministry of Jesus while he was here on earth – about all the good that he went about doing. Here Peter brings these Gentiles face to face with...

3. The Death and Resurrection of Jesus

The good that Jesus did while he was here on earth was truly amazing. He performed many miracles that helped so many people. But all of these

miracles were simply signs to prove who he really was – that he was God come in the flesh to reach out to sinful mankind.

But unless Jesus had lived a sinless life, he could never have gone to the cross and laid down his life as an atoning sacrifice for the sins of the world. Yes, it was the Jews who put him to death by hanging him on a tree. He was rejected by his own people – the people he had come to live and work among. The Jews rejected him, but they handed him over to the Romans, for them to pass judgement on him, and put him to death by crucifixion. So both Jews and Gentiles were implicated in the cruel death of our Lord Jesus Christ. There is none of us righteous, not one of us, Jew and Gentile alike - we are all under sin, and therefore we are all under God's judgement. We are equally guilty of nailing Jesus Christ, the sinless Son of God, to that cross 2000 years ago!

But God didn't leave him there (v.40)

'But God raised him from the dead on the third day and caused him to be seen.'

The Jews and Gentiles together may have done their worst putting Jesus on the cross, but God was doing his best work even in the midst of all of that. Through the death of his only Son on that cross he was once and for all paying the price for the sins of the world, and so on the third day God was able to raise Jesus from the dead - triumphant over sin, death and the devil!

God had already chosen witnesses who were given the privilege of seeing Jesus alive after his resurrection from the dead. In particular he was seen by the Apostles, including Peter, when he met with them in the Upper Room and by the shores of the Sea of Galilee. He even ate and drank with them on these occasions to prove that he really was alive from the dead, in a glorified resurrection body – he wasn't just a ghost or spirit or apparition (v.41).

In fact on the last occasion that he appeared to them as disciples (v.42), *'He commanded [them] to preach to the people and to testify that [Jesus] is the one whom God [has] appointed as Judge of the living and the dead.'*

So Jesus, the One who died for the sins of the world, is the One who will one day Judge the sins of the world. Either we will be welcomed into heaven on that day, or we will be banished to hell for evermore. There is no other option.

But the good news in v.43 is that:

'All the prophets testify about him that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name.'

This is how we can all know peace with God. This is how we can all know the joy of having our sins forgiven – simply by believing in his name!

And what does the name of Jesus mean?

'You shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.'

That's why there is power in the name of Jesus. That's why there is hope in the name of Jesus. That's why we can know forgiveness of sins, because of his death, burial and resurrection on our behalf – all we have to do is believe – put our trust in Him, turn from our sin and all we know to be wrong, and we will be forgiven, and be at peace with God our Maker. What good news that must have been for those Gentiles hearing that message for the first time that day?

But Peter didn't get to finish his message, because at that moment, the Holy Spirit broke into that Gentile gathering in Cornelius' home. While Peter was still speaking – The Holy Spirit fell on all who had heard that great message! What a wonderful moment that must have been for all who were present! So that brings us finally to notice...

4. A Group of Gentiles who were saved by God (vs.44-48)

Not only did Peter not get finishing his sermon, and the Holy Spirit fell unexpectedly upon all who were gathered there, but the circumcised (Jewish) believers, the brothers from Joppa, who had travelled with Peter, just couldn't believe their eyes! Maybe they had come to keep an eye on Peter, to check up on him, we don't really know, but they are completely astonished when they see the Holy Spirit falling on the Gentiles in exactly the same way he had come upon the Jews who believed back in Acts ch.2 on the Day of Pentecost.

The outward evidence was the same – these Gentile believers were now speaking in tongues and praising God in just the same way as the Jewish believers had done back in Jerusalem. They had received the gift of the Holy Spirit, and the outward manifestation of that was to prove to the Jews that they had been accepted by God on the same basis as the Jews who had believed.

It's at that point that Peter speaks up and asks the question (v.47):

'Can anyone keep these people from being baptised with water?

They have received the Holy Spirit just as we have.'

And when there was no objection from his fellow Jewish believers, he goes further, and actually **orders** that they be baptised in the name of Jesus Christ. As an outward sign and evidence that they were all united, Jew and Gentile alike, as believers in Christ, by the one ordinance - believers' baptism.

Conclusion

What a momentous day that was in the life of the early church. These Gentile believers complete the story by asking Peter to stay with them for a few more days – because they had so much to learn, and so much to talk about. They now needed to be discipled in their new found faith. We are Gentiles here this morning. We need to praise God that this Gospel did cross that barrier from the Jews to us all those years ago, but we need to make sure we continue to cross barriers with the Gospel in our world today!