

Reflections on the message by Mike Kerry, 28th March 2010

“A significant day in the life of the church” Acts 10:1-48

This passage is about a significant day in the life of the church.

Herod the Great was regarded as a madman. He was totally ruthless. He killed many people including his wife, his children, 46 members of the Sanhedrin, and of course he was responsible for the slaughter of innocents (Matthew 2:16-18). But he was one of the greatest builders known in the world. He reigned from 37 BC to 4 BC. It was a stable period, with unprecedented growth and construction. Herod had an amiable relationship with Rome, to whom the region was very important. It was at the crossroads of some important trade routes. It supplied olive oil, dates and wine. He built cities, palaces, fortresses and aqueducts. He built the fortress in Masada and the Temple of Jerusalem. The platform of the temple is still visible today with its retaining wall, this is the wall that people visit today. The temple itself was totally destroyed by the Romans as prophesied by Jesus Christ (Matthew 24:1-3, Mark 13:1-3, Luke 21:5-7). Herod built the port city of Caesarea one of the largest ports in the empire. The harbour that he built still exists. There was a hippodrome there, and an amphitheatre. It was a hedonistic place. The people were pagan. Any Jews living in the city would find it to be the antithesis of all that they believed.

Acts 10:1-48. Petrified Peter became powerful Peter at Pentecost. He became a powerful witness. He caused a lame beggar to be healed. He confronted Ananias and Sapphira. But at Pentecost those affected were all Jews, including proselytes. Salvation is only available to Jews until this time. So we praise God for what happened at Caesarea. In this passage Luke tells us about the Gospel crossing a cultural barrier that existed since the time of Moses.

There are two main characters in this story, Cornelius and Peter. Cornelius was a Roman soldier, a God-fearer, though not a Christian. He was neither a Jew nor proselyte. In the Jewish mind there were Jews, proselytes and Gentiles. Among the latter were God-fearers like Cornelius.

Cornelius prayed at three o'clock in the afternoon. He received a miraculous message. The messenger told Cornelius even where Peter was, 30 miles away at Joppa. The command to Peter was radical. To eat with Gentiles was forbidden to Jews. Peter was touring around the believers of Judea, and the church was growing. Peter was praying and received this vision. The animals on the sheet were unclean to the Jews. It shocked Peter, but what came next shocked him more. A paradigm shift is coming to Peter. The Jews could not eat these things: anything that died of old age, disease or injury; mammals that do not chew the cud and have split hooves, such as pigs and camels; fish without scales or fins, such as shellfish; scavenging birds; insects that do not hop; crawling animals, such as snakes, lizards, mice, and weasels. They could make you ceremonially unclean. Much of this became mere outward observance. Some of the ceremonial laws come from the Talmudic interpretation, not from Scripture. The attitude of the heart is more important (Matthew 5:21-30, Mark 7:1-23). In the passage, the food laws are withdrawn because our relationship is based on Christ's death, not on dietary laws. These animals came down from heaven, and only clean things can approach God.

There are people out there who we need to embrace, whom we have excluded as unacceptable, even though we don't call them unclean. Is this a barrier to sharing the Gospel? We may have done this because of education, economic status, appearance, colour of skin, or beliefs. If God is prepared to welcome them, so should we. God loves us and He is our example. Let us start putting this right in BFC first, then move out from there.

God repeated the command to Peter three times. The vision ended, and Cornelius's men were knocking at the door. Peter understood that God was telling him to embrace all people whatever their race and background. Peter accepted the appeal to go to Caesarea. God has no favourites, and Peter had no right to favouritism. Nor do we. (James 2:1-12).

Christ was clearly communicated in Peter's message to Cornelius' household. Anyone can be forgiven. God's Salvation is for all people. (John 3:16). The Gospel is spreading to the whole world. The response of Cornelius' household was to accept Jesus, confirmed by a repeat of

Pentecost – but in a Roman city. Pentecost was a sign from heaven. Cornelius is the first ever recorded Gentile believer. It opened the floodgates. What a magnificent day! Jesus died for us too! These people received the same gifts as a Pentecost, but this time it was for Gentiles rather than Jews.

The invitation to the Gospel is for everyone. We must share the Gospel openly. Are you excluding anyone from your life? Are we a friendly church, or are you excluding someone here? What about neighbours, work or school? Are we embracing the world? Are we doing enough? Remember the Great Commission (Matthew 28:16-20).

It all happened following prayer. A survey has claimed the only one in seven Christians in the UK read the Bible in between Sundays. It is suspected that prayer may be much the same. As Peter learnt in Acts 10, so we need to learn what God desires, so that we embrace people with His love. We need to be people of the word of God. In it there are untapped mines. Start digging.