

Sermon Given by

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At the Morning Service on 29<sup>th</sup> August 2010

Acts 10:1-23 - "Under Orders"

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The story is told of an occasion in the nineteenth century when the Duke of Wellington turned up at a missions rally. A clergyman present was rather surprised to see him. 'My Lord,' he asked, 'do you believe in missions?' 'Well' asked the great soldier, 'what are your marching orders?' to which question the Clergyman replied that the Bible does say we are to make disciples of all nations. Wellington's answer was brief and to the point: 'Well there is nothing more to say, is there? Soldier, you are to obey orders...

Our title for this morning's study in Acts Chapter 10 is 'Under orders', because the point is clearly that God was bringing two people together so that the spread of the Gospel could happen; he commanded Cornelius to bring Peter to his house and he commended Peter to go there.

The resulting meeting was commanded by God, a God-ordained event, by divine appointment. And it makes it very clear whether you are someone who considers yourself a Christian or as yet an enquirer, someone on the outside looking in, that God is committed to his message being passed on and received.

Whichever of those activities you are supposed to be involved with – it will be one or the other for every single one of us here this morning – whichever it is, it is a must: we are all under orders. So we are going to look at Cornelius's vision and his response and then Peter's vision and his response.

The record of how God got Cornelius's attention with the first vision of the chapter is there for us in vv 1-6.

**Cornelius' vision.**

***<sup>1</sup>At Caesarea there was a man named Cornelius, a centurion in what was known as the Italian Regiment. <sup>2</sup>He and all his family were devout and God-fearing; he gave generously to those in need and prayed to God regularly.***

**<sup>3</sup>One day at about three in the afternoon he had a vision. He distinctly saw an angel of God, who came to him and said, "Cornelius!"**

**<sup>4</sup>Cornelius stared at him in fear. "What is it, Lord?" he asked.**

***The angel answered, "Your prayers and gifts to the poor have come up as a memorial offering before God. <sup>5</sup>Now send men to Joppa to bring back a man named Simon who is called Peter. <sup>6</sup>He is staying with Simon the tanner, whose house is by the sea."***

We're meant to note all the historical markers in the account here: *where the event happened* – Caesarea – 32 miles north up the coast from Joppa, where we left things at the end of Chapter 9.

*Who it happened to* – not just a nameless roman soldier, but Cornelius; we're given his rank and his regiment.

We're told *when the event happened*, too – 15 hundred hours – which happened to be the Jewish time of prayer.

Those details are significant – because Luke is writing history, history that he has researched; history that can be checked out by the reader. Strikingly whenever academics and experts have done that with Luke they end up concluding that his accuracy is second to no-one, which is good news for you if you sometimes wonder whether this is fact or fiction. What we read here actually happened.

But the details are significant in another way as well – because this is the God who shows up in human history at specific points in time; in the lives of specific individuals in specific places. He did it earlier in the person of Jesus Christ – in a little backwater of a Roman province; and now here he is intervening in human history in a very specific way once again.

Clearly God has been drawing Cornelius to this point for a while. He is described as devout and God-fearing (which is almost a technical term for the Gentiles throughout the Ancient World who had attached themselves to the Jewish faith, without becoming full converts).

God-fearers used to attend the synagogue, they had embraced many of the moral standards of the Old Testament – but they stopped short of getting circumcised. And Cornelius was serious about it – giving to the poor and praying. Which God took note of.

Not that those good deeds ensured his forgiveness or made him a Christian – he still needed to hear the message of Jesus Christ. But they indicated that he was a sincere, serious person. That is who God chose to speak to – sending an angel with very basic instructions – get hold of Simon Peter from Joppa.

There's no mention of whether he knew who Peter was; but perhaps that little detail in verse 6 that Peter was living with Simon the leather tanner is more than giving Cornelius a postcode to type into Google Maps. It might well have encouraged Cornelius, that he was being directed to someone who was willing to cross boundaries for God.

Tanners, you see, had to handle animal carcasses to get their skins for use in making leather. So under strict Old Testament rules they were unclean. And maybe Cornelius puts two and two together that someone who can live with an unclean tanner will be fine about coming to an unclean Roman Soldier.

So after the vision notice his obedience in verses 7 and 8.

### **Cornelius's Response**

***<sup>7</sup>When the angel who spoke to him had gone, Cornelius called two of his servants and a devout soldier who was one of his attendants. <sup>8</sup>He told them everything that had happened and sent them to Joppa.***

Notice the details again: he doesn't go to Joppa himself – he wasn't told to do that by the angelic vision. He sends people – three of them – including one other God-fearer.

Cornelius is obeying the precise details of the vision – because God is organising events so that this gospel opportunity doesn't end up a simple one-to-one chat between Peter and Cornelius. There are all sorts of other people involved, who witnessed what happened and were brought in on it.

That's important later, because this is a milestone event in the outward spread of the good news. People were going to want to know how it had happened, so that the validity of spreading the good news to Gentiles or to Romans or the English for that matter was absolutely beyond doubt.

So Cornelius obeys. Let me just pinpoint for the benefit of anyone who is an enquirer here that that obedience to the voice of God is a model for you.

There comes a point for everyone in their spiritual journey where something more than being a serious, sincere enquirer is needed. You will need to respond obediently to what you already know if you want to know more.

You may not have the kind of vision that Cornelius had, but maybe you are aware that God wants you to read a book or to go to some course or event or to ask a Christian friend to spell the message out to you. He has brought those opportunities or influences into your life, just so you can find out more. So don't delay, obey.

Let's move on to the next vision which God laid on to bring the meeting between Peter and Cornelius about.

### **Peter's vision.**

***<sup>9</sup>About noon the following day as they were on their journey and approaching the city, Peter went up on the roof to pray. <sup>10</sup>He became hungry and wanted something to eat, and while the meal was being prepared, he fell into a trance. <sup>11</sup>He saw heaven opened and something like a large sheet being let down to earth by its four corners. <sup>12</sup>It contained all kinds of four-footed animals, as well as reptiles of the earth and birds of the air. <sup>13</sup>Then a voice told him, "Get up, Peter. Kill and eat."***

***<sup>14</sup>"Surely not, Lord!" Peter replied. "I have never eaten anything impure or unclean."***

***<sup>15</sup>The voice spoke to him a second time, "Do not call anything impure that God has made clean."***

***<sup>16</sup>This happened three times, and immediately the sheet was taken back to heaven.***

Notice once again the detail of the time the vision happened. Noon the next day. As if the dates and times of this are all down in God's diary: everything happens to his timetable, just when it's meant to.

Notice the repetition of the vision in verse 16: it happened three times.

That obviously stresses to Peter the importance of the vision – he hasn't got the details of the dream wrong – God really wants this message communicated.

It also stresses perhaps the difficulty Peter would have to learn this lesson. There's a story about a clergyman arriving at a new post and his first Sunday in the parish he preaches a sermon which is apparently very warmly received by the congregation; but the following week he stands up and preaches and it is an exact repeat of the sermon he gave the previous week.

People muttered into their sleeves – 'he must have picked up the wrong sermon on the way out by mistake' – everyone's a bit embarrassed – too embarrassed to say anything – but it gets worse because the following week he stands up to preach and it's exactly the same sermon again.

The Churchwarden thinks I've got to say something. So he plucks up the courage to say it – 'Excuse me, vicar, but did you realise you've preached exactly the same sermon three weeks running now!' 'I know that', the vicar is supposed to have replied, 'And when people have started to do something about it, we'll have something else!'

You see, we are not nearly as receptive to the voice of God as we think are.

So what was the message which Peter needed to hear three times? At one level Peter is being told that it is OK for him to eat unclean food. The animals which were listed in our reading from Deuteronomy are OK, 'Peter – kill and eat'. Which is only what Jesus had already said when he declared all foods clean.

But it was a vital lesson if ever Christians from a Jewish background were going to be rub shoulders with Gentiles and share the good news of Jesus with them. They would have to overcome the cultural revulsion they felt and eat what every fibre of their being hated.

The Newspapers last week ran a story about a Serbian testicle cooking competition. Tourism chiefs in Ozrem, Serbia are hoping that a testicle-cooking festival will put the village on the map. Organiser Ivo Mokovich said this: 'The importance of a recognisable brand to sell a region cannot be underestimated – look at how many people go to Scotland because of the whisky'. This year entrants will be allowed to submit dishes 'using any kind of testicles they want, large or small. We're looking forward to seeing what the expert Serbian testicle cooks come up with...'

My apologies for causing the male half of the congregation instinctively to cross their legs and the entire congregation to wretch inwardly.

I'm not just trying to shock you for fun – but to give you a sense of the nausea that Peter might have felt at the very thought that he might have to eat unclean food. But the spread of the gospel will be deeply uncomfortable for us – maybe to the point of what we eat. I remember hearing an elderly missionary who said he had often had to pray before the start of a meal what he called the missionary grace: 'Lord, I'll get this down, you keep it down...'.

But there is more to the meaning of the vision. God wasn't just saying be prepared to eat unclean food.

Notice what the heavenly voice said after Peter's protest:

***<sup>15</sup>The voice spoke to him a second time, "Do not call anything impure that God has made clean."***

The point is that God is committed to making unclean **Gentiles** clean – that is the lesson Peter is going to have to learn.

Let's move on then from **Peter's vision** to **Peter's response of obedience** in verses 17-23.

### **Peter's Response.**

***<sup>17</sup>While Peter was wondering about the meaning of the vision, the men sent by Cornelius found out where Simon's house was and stopped at the gate.***

***<sup>18</sup>They called out, asking if Simon who was known as Peter was staying there.***

***<sup>19</sup>While Peter was still thinking about the vision, the Spirit said to him, "Simon, three <sup>[a]</sup>men are looking for you. <sup>20</sup>So get up and go downstairs. Do not hesitate to go with them, for I have sent them."***

***<sup>21</sup>Peter went down and said to the men, "I'm the one you're looking for. Why have you come?"***

***<sup>22</sup>The men replied, "We have come from Cornelius the centurion. He is a righteous and God-fearing man, who is respected by all the Jewish people. A holy angel told him to have you come to his house so that he could hear what***

***you have to say."*** <sup>23</sup>***Then Peter invited the men into the house to be his guests.***

Plainly Peter is getting the point – because in that last verse he welcomes the Gentile guests under the same roof. What must have convinced him is the timing of the vision: while he was pondering the meaning of what he had heard at that precise point the door-bell goes.

It would be pretty hard to miss the point. Even more so when the Spirit added that he was meant to go without hesitation. Especially when he heard from Cornelius's men that he had had a vision from God.

It wasn't hard to see what response was needed. But our translation conceals a double-meaning in verse 20. ***'Do not hesitate to go with them'*** could equally be translated: ***'Making no distinction, go with them'***. That is the lesson for Peter... Don't distinguish between Jews and Gentiles, because God doesn't. When Jesus died on the cross he paid for Gentiles to be made clean and what God has made clean Peter must not call impure. The response from Peter is exactly right and he obeys promptly in going to share the good news with Gentiles.

So what are the implications of this passage for us if we are Christians this morning? Let me just say a word or two on what we are not supposed to learn. This is not a passage primarily to tell us to expect visions as the way for God to communicate with us today.

Sure God laid on visions for Cornelius and for Peter; sure he could lay on visions for us today. But that is not the normal way he communicates his plans and purposes to us.

To argue that it is sometimes called 'example theology'. What happens in example theology is this: in a godly desire to be controlled by Scripture in our personal decisions and our church life, we look for Biblical examples to point us in the right direction. Once we have found examples appropriate to the matter in hand, they then become a 'biblical basis' for action. It's a method which individuals use and which groups of Christians use – so a PCC quotes a Biblical example to back up a proposed plan or policy.

The logic of it goes like this: What God has approved at a certain place, at a certain time and in certain circumstances, he approves at all places, at all times

and in all circumstances. So if Abraham, or Moses or Peter did something, so can I and so should I. If God commanded it then, he commands it now. If God worked like this once, we can expect him to work in the same way today.

Of course there are often great benefits to seeing what Bible characters did. But if we adopt the example theology approach we are always going to be selective. We will learn from some examples and leave others out! No one suggests, for example, that just because God once spoke to the prophet Balaam through a donkey, so we should all keep a donkey in the garden just in case. Example theology comes perilously close to treating the Bible like a lucky dip.

Even more significantly, example theology fails to understand that many of the events recorded in the Bible are included primarily because they were unique occurrences or at least highly unusual. They aren't included to be pictures of the normal Christian life.

Acts 10 is a case in point. The early church found itself at a strategic crossroads in the spread of the gospel beyond Israel. This is how God pushed the church through that massive barrier to world mission – the Jew/Gentile division. So the application for us is not that we should expect visions to direct us in our evangelism. You and I are not Peter and we are not taking the Gospel to the very first Gentile ever.

The application for us is to realise how significant the worldwide spread of the gospel is. If God had to lay on visions in this way, the place of world evangelisation in his heart is absolutely clear.

So three challenges as we close:

- Are we committed as we should be to **world** evangelisation? There is an external mission group in the church which has chosen six or seven mission partner groups. They've deliberately limited themselves to that number so that the average congregation member knows who our partners are. Well are we really partners, because world evangelisation matters to us? The challenge I sometimes throw out is that everyone should know something about all seven partner groups and everything about one of them. Have you tried to find out in depth what is involved

in one of the mission agencies we are partnered with – as an expression of your commitment to world evangelisation.

- Secondly, are we committed to **local** evangelisation? It's a slightly quirky aspect of our witness at All Saints that we are a local church in a fairly small village. Under 800 people live here – and because of Christian neighbours, the Newsletter, the signs on Church Street, there really can't be anyone in the village who can honestly say they are really unreached. No one will honestly be able to tell God that they couldn't know the way of salvation. In a sense, Little Shelford is already evangelised. Therefore All Saints has to ask what are we as a church going to do to reach the unreached in the local area. A church plant in Sawston was exactly right. But we need to ask ourselves what is the next expression of a commitment to local evangelisation. If the route is not open to us through Anglican structures will we still seek some other way to further the gospel in the area – how about in Saffron Walden or Trumpington when all the new houses are built?
- Lastly are we committed to **personal** evangelisation? To rubbing shoulders with people, perhaps despite our cultural prejudices; to sharing our lives with them – eating with them – so that a relationship is in place within which we can share Christ. As we face an October outreach, never mind the events we want to lay on. Are there actually people we know, whom we can invite? So they can hear about Christ and respond to him. There should be – remember Wellington: mission is our marching orders.

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Audio versions of the sermons can be freely downloaded from the All Saints Little Shelford website, <http://www.allsaintslittleshelford.org>. These are available in two formats, mp3 and wma.

(All scripture quoted is from the New International Version of the Bible unless otherwise stated.)