

Sermon Given by

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At the Evening Service on 5th September 2010

Acts 10:23-48 - "God does not show favouritism"

My mum is not an argumentative type; she has her views and opinions on things but she wouldn't like to fall out with anyone over them. Naturally she's a peace-maker.

I can remember though how quite soon after I was converted, I was talking to her – I think it was about who I was going to invite to my 21st birthday party and in our conversation I must have distinguished between Christian friends and non-Christian friends.

And Mum, who as I say is not at all someone who relishes a feisty debate, picked me up on this and said how she didn't like the way I referred to some of my friends as "non-Christians". We chatted and it became clear that the reason she didn't like me referring to them like that was because, like so many others, Mum thought a Christian was essentially a good person and therefore a non-Christian was, by definition, a bad person. So fair enough to call a rapist or a murderer a non-Christian but to refer to some of my friends as non-Christians that seemed from her perspective to be very uncharitable and more to the point untrue.

I can't remember if on that occasion I looked up any Bible passages with Mum but if I had that conversation again, our passage tonight in Acts 10 would be a brilliant passage to turn to. We'll see why that is the case in a minute but first we need a very quick re-cap on the story so far in Acts as we start or re-start this series.

Not starting in a completely random place - our passage picks up from where we left off in the morning services last week - 10:23. Now up to this point, we've seen Acts 1:8 that key theme verse for the whole book being worked out.

In that verse Jesus is speaking to his disciples just before he ascends into heaven and he says to them: ***"But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit***

comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”

And we’ve seen that start to happen! God sent his Holy Spirit on the disciples at Pentecost and since then the disciples have been empowered and emboldened to preach the gospel in Jerusalem and in Judea and wonderfully many Jews were converted.

Then in Acts 8 – big big seismic shift the gospel went outside Kosher Jewish territory for the first time when Philip had the courage to go to the Samaritans – this racially mixed half-Jewish group.

And now in Chapter 10 the gospel is going for the first time – even bigger seismic shift - to the Gentiles – the non-Jews.

Next week in Chapter 11, as Peter re-tells this story, we’re going to focus more on the enormity of the gospel crossing that boundary and going to the Gentiles and the implications for us in our evangelism.

This week we’re going to focus on the sermon that Peter preached when he got to Cornelius’ house.

In v1-23 we’ve seen how God brought Cornelius and Peter together. Then Peter arrives at Cornelius’ house in Caesarea where v24 Cornelius has gathered together his relatives and best mates. There’s slightly awkward scene in v25-26 when Cornelius falls at Peter’s feet but Peter puts him right and then very calmly, very politely inquires – end of v29: ***“May I ask why you sent for me?”***

Cornelius tells Peter how the angel had appeared and gave instructions to send for him. V33: ***“So I sent for you immediately, and it was good of you to come. Now we are all here in the presence of God to listen to everything the Lord has commanded you to tell us.”***

Once, about 6 years ago, when I was working at a church in London I turned up to the evening service, had a look at the service sheet and saw to my great shock that I was down to preach. This was news to me and I must admit to being somewhat flustered by that experience. Thankfully it was a mistake and I didn’t have to preach from scratch.

Peter turns up, he's told he's preaching and this wasn't a mistake but Peter, unlike me, wasn't flustered. He preached the red hot gospel to Cornelius. And thinking back to that conversation I had with my Mum, let's remember what sort of a man Cornelius was. That brings us to our first heading...

Cornelius was a good person

Cornelius was the kind of person you would like as a next-door neighbour. He was a hard-working career soldier. V1 He was ***“a centurion in what was known as the Italian Regiment.”*** Or to put it modern day language, he was a Major in the Grenadier Guards, a natural leader of men and brave too – he'd been decorated for gallantry under fire in Afghanistan.

He was a family man v2 and he was a thoroughly good bloke. He didn't fiddle his tax returns, he helped out one evening a week with the Scout Group and we read end of v2 and end of v31 that he gave very generously to charity. He was a good person. And what's more he had a spiritual side. He was a God-fearer and he used to pray, end of v2, regularly. Lots of people if they saw him today would say that he was a very 'Christian' man.

And yet what happened when Cornelius prayed? God answered his prayer by sending an evangelist to convert him. In the world's eyes he was exactly the sort of person who didn't need to become a Christian – he was already a thoroughly good and decent person with a spiritual dimension.

But this chapter would have been a great place to turn to with my Mum because it shows us that being a Christian is not about being good and somehow achieving our salvation. Nor is it about being religious – all the God-fearing in the world can't cut it. Being a Christian is not about achieving rather it is all about receiving – receiving what Jesus Christ has done for us.

So when Peter preaches his sermon he doesn't say: “God has heard your prayers and seen your good deeds and he just wants you to try a little harder; give a little more money to the poor and up the religious practise a bit.”

He doesn't even say: “Keep going with your Do-It –Yourself religion Cornelius, you're on course for heaven just keep going as you are.” He doesn't say that because although Cornelius was extremely nice and extremely generous, he

was also extremely lost. Good as he was, devout as he was, religious as he was, something vital was missing and that something was a personal knowledge of the Lord Jesus Christ.

This passage will challenge some of us to think whether our situation is that of Cornelius. The chances are that there are one or two here tonight who, like Cornelius, you believe in God, like him you have a prayer life, like him you give to charity, like him you have some prior knowledge of Christianity.

We see that that was the case with Cornelius the way Peter says to him in v36: ***“You know the message God sent to the people of Israel, telling the good news of peace through Jesus Christ...”***

Cornelius had picked this up somewhere along the way but its proper significance for him had never been appreciated and so had not been responded to. Maybe like Cornelius one or two here have a religious background but like him you are missing something vital.

Well in his sermon Peter fills us in on the missing blanks of what we need to know and do.

The first thing to realise says Peter is that ***Jesus lived a unique life*** - v37: ***“You know what 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.”***

This was no ordinary man. He was God’s man. His fame spread like wildfire through the towns and villages and people flocked to meet him and hear him. God was with him, as he was not with any other person before or since. Here was a truly good person and yet...

The second thing you must understand, says Peter, is that ***Jesus died a unique death*** - v 39 ***“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.”*** Now doesn’t that strike you as rather a strange way of describing Jesus death? Cornelius was after all a Roman soldier, he knew all about crucifixion, so why not say ‘they killed him by hanging him on a cross’? It is because Peter was aware that

Cornelius knew his Old Testament and especially Deuteronomy 21:23 which says: ***“anyone who is hung on a tree is under God’s curse.”***

Jesus was cursed by God by hanging on a tree. Why so, when as Peter has just said, he went around doing good? The reason is that he wasn’t put there to bear *his* curse, but to bear *ours*. He died as our representative and our substitute, taking the judgement for sin which is rightly ours. He is the one who deals with our biggest problem, being cut off from God by being cut off for us, doing what no end of religion and no end of good works in a million years could ever do - provide the sacrifice necessary to get rid of our sin.

Thirdly, Cornelius had to see that ***Jesus has a unique role***. The Cross wasn’t the end of the story but rather v40: ***“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.”***

And then Peter tells Cornelius what Jesus commanded them to preach. V42: ***“He commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he is the one whom God appointed as judge of the living and the dead.”*** So the first part of Christ’s unique role is that he is Judge of all.

And this is an appointment that we can’t get out of. We can cancel a dentist appointment because we don’t really want to go but we can’t get out of this appointment. Jesus is Judge of all but the good news is that he is also the Saviour of all who trust in him. V43 ***“All the prophets testify about him that everyone (and do note that) everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name.”***

This forgiveness is open to all and yet we need to believe and if there’s someone here tonight who hasn’t yet done that then can I urge you to come to Him now as your Saviour before you face him as your Judge.

Once in a frontier town in the Wild West a horse bolted and ran away with a wagon with a little boy in it. Seeing this boy in danger a young man at the scene risked his life to catch the horse and stop the wagon.

Sadly that boy grew up to be a criminal and one day he stood before a judge to be sentenced for a serious crime, a capital offence. The prisoner recognised the judge as the man who years earlier had saved his life; so he pled for mercy on the basis of that experience. But the words from the bench silenced his plea: “Young man then I was your saviour, today I am your judge and I must sentence you to be hanged.”

When Jesus returns to judge he will say to rebellious sinners, “During that long day of grace in your earthly life I was the Saviour and if you’d believed in me and followed me, I would have forgiven you but today I am your Judge – depart from me and from all good things forever.”

It won’t be enough on that day to say that we tried to live a good life or that our parents were believers or that we used to go to church now and then or that we gave money to charity – we must be believers ourselves. So please come to him now in the day of salvation before it’s too late.

Don’t be fooled into thinking that being good is good enough. If anyone was good enough it was Cornelius – and yet how did God answer his prayers – he sent him an evangelist so that he might hear the gospel and respond to it.

Many of here will be clear on this; we know that we’re saved by grace not by our own good works. We know that Christianity is not primarily about what I do but about what Jesus has done. We know that as the song goes: “In Christ alone my hope is found...”

And yet, how easy it is to waver in our evangelism when we come across people who are so nice and friendly and good but we mustn’t be fooled by appearances. Like Cornelius they might be extremely nice but if they’re without Christ they are extremely lost.

Reflecting on the natural inclination of all of us to think that being good *is* good enough, the great 19thC preacher Charles Spurgeon said this: Sometimes people are so foolish as to think that the doing of professedly religious acts will take them to heaven: fasting in lent, decorating the altar with needlework or giving a new organ, they do many such things. Many who are nominally Christians appear to me (says Spurgeon) to believe in a sort of sincere obedience-covenant, in which a man does as much as he can, and Christ will do

the rest, and so the sinner will be saved; but it is not so...for God's word declares: 'By works of the law no one shall be put right with God.'

No-one is good enough for God; not even the most morally upright and respectable people – people like Cornelius. We shouldn't kid ourselves that it's any other way. As Spurgeon said, quoting Romans 3:20 'By works of the law no one shall be put right with God.' But wonderfully Acts 10:43 everyone (no matter what they've done) everyone who believes in Jesus receives forgiveness of sins.

So think of the most loving and kind non-Christian that you know – perhaps a close friend or family member. Picture them in your mind's eye and remember that good as they are, they are also lost and so the kindest and most loving thing you can do for them is to pray for them and ask God to give them a spiritual hunger and ask God to give you a clear opportunity to reach out to them with the gospel message.

The Church Times is a weekly C of E newspaper - I don't have a subscription – I used to read it a bit at Theological College but I never found it the most thrilling read. I heard recently though of a very heart-warming letter that was sent in several years ago. It went like this: 'Dear Sir, I am a country solicitor and was, at the time of my conversion some 18 months ago a churchwarden. I had been a churchgoer for most of my life... I was baptised as a baby and confirmed as an immature 15 year old, so in theory at least, I appeared to have all the right qualifications for calling myself a Christian; but I have to say that I have serious doubts as to whether I truly was one. I think I was unsure of my beliefs, I had nothing to say about the 'Good News' to my fellow man and I would have shrunk from praying out loud in public, and as for reading the Bible, well it hadn't been off the shelf in years. I dare to suggest that, in all that, I had much in common with many other members of my church. Now by the grace of God I have joy and peace when before they were lacking. Why? Because I have been 'born again'.'

When a person comes personally to Christ and trusts in him as their Saviour and Lord and is born again, they know a peace and joy that no amount of works-based religion will give. That solicitor who wrote into the Church times knew it and so did Cornelius.

Some religious and morally upright people will of course find the gospel very offensive – they won't like being told that they need forgiveness. Others like Cornelius will welcome it with gladness and relief. It seems that Cornelius and his pals must have believed straight away for we read v44: ***“while Peter was still speaking these words, the Holy Spirit came on all who heard the message.”*** V46 they were ***“speaking in tongues and praising God.”*** So v48 Peter gave orders that they be baptised.

This was a huge occasion in salvation history – the gospel going to the Gentiles and as I say we'll be thinking about that side of it more next week but for tonight the key point to take to heart is that many people, may in the world's eyes be thoroughly good and decent sorts but if like Cornelius they are without Christ they are also thoroughly lost and their greatest need whether they know it or not is to hear and respond to the good news as Cornelius did.

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.)