

Sermon Given by

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Acts 11:1-18 - "Even to the Gentiles!"

Mahatma Ghandi was one of the great and iconic leaders of the 20th C. As a young man Ghandi, who was born into a Hindu family, read the gospels and was very struck by the person of Christ and considered very seriously about becoming a Christian.

But once while he was staying in Britain, he went to church – he went through the door and was refused a seat. The sidesman suggested he go elsewhere and worship with his own people. As he left he said to himself that if Christians have caste differences too then he might as well remain a Hindu, which he did till his dying day.

We're saddened and appalled to hear that and rightly so but I wonder if we too are in danger of excluding people from hearing the gospel - the difference is that we do it in different and more subtle ways – so subtle perhaps that we don't realise it.

The challenge of tonight's passage is for us to face up to any prejudice we may have - no matter how deep it may be lurking within us – and then to get rid of it so that the gospel can continue to go to the ends of the earth.

The early church faced many hurdles and barriers as it sought to take the gospel to the ends of the earth.

They faced opposition from without the church – severe persecution with many being imprisoned and some like Stephen being martyred. They also faced difficulties within the church.

There was the argument in Chapter 6 between Grecian Jews and Hebraic Jews as they fell out over the distribution of food to their widows. That squabble was dealt with head on, a solution was found and schism was avoided.

But now in chapters 10 & 11 the church faced its greatest hurdle yet, prejudice from within.

Last week we looked at Cornelius' conversion; and you'll remember if you were with us that good as he was, religious as he was he was still lost. And so when he prayed God didn't answer his prayers by saying: "You're rewarded for your good deeds Cornelius and your religious acts – well done, you're on course for heaven." No what God did was he sent an evangelist, Simon Peter, to tell him the gospel and wonderfully he was converted.

That brings us to our passage and our main heading for tonight is **A hurdle to overcome – prejudice**

We see that especially in v1-3. News had spread quickly v1 ***"The apostles and the brothers throughout Judea heard that the Gentiles also had received the word of God."***

So we can imagine the raised eyebrows and tut-tutting back at the head office in Jerusalem: "what's Peter done now!" We can hear the incredulity and shock horror in the words of the circumcised believers in v3: ***"You went into the house of the uncircumcised men and ate with them."*** What on earth do you think you were doing Peter?

Surely, so they thought, you couldn't be a Christian without first becoming a Jew and of course Peter had come from the same stable as them - he used to think in just the same way. At the start of chapter 10 he had had the same prejudice.

John Stott has written: "It is difficult for us to comprehend the impassable gulf which yawned in those days between the Jews on the one hand and the Gentiles on the other. Not that the OT countenanced such a divide. On the contrary it affirmed that God had a purpose for them. By choosing one nation he intended to bless all nations. The tragedy was that Israel twisted the doctrine of election into one of favouritism and became filled with racial pride and hatred and developed traditions which kept them apart. No orthodox Jew would ever enter the home of a Gentile, even a God-fearer, or invite such people into his home. On the contrary, all familiar intercourse with Gentiles was forbidden and no pious Jew would have sat down at the table of a Gentile."

So racial prejudice - this great obstacle stood in the way of the gospel going to the ends of the earth - to Gentiles like us in Britain.

But chapter 10 wasn't just about the conversion of Cornelius it was also about another conversion - the conversion, in a slightly different sense, of Peter. He had had a complete turn-around in his thinking on this matter.

Now, God had to show the Jerusalem head office and us that there's no corner of this world beyond the reach of the gospel – there's not a single person who doesn't need to hear the saving news, who's beyond the bounds of God's saving grace.

That's why God gave Peter the vision and that's the next heading for v4-10.

The Vision

Peter didn't keep his head down and hope that it'd all blow over – he didn't hide, no he faced his critics head on. He's a model to us in the Christian school of management. If there's some problem in the church as a whole or our small group that might cause disunity we shouldn't hide from it but we should face up to the issue.

And note his method - he didn't return fire with fire; his hackles weren't up – rather he simply told what God had been doing in his life – he told them about the vision.

V4: ***“Peter began and explained everything to them precisely as it had happened...”*** and so he tells them about the giant-sized duvet cover that he saw being let down from heaven full of all these animals and birds that previously they had been forbidden from eating and the voice saying – go for it Peter, tuck in. Kill and eat!

Peter was aghast and said v8: ***“Surely not Lord! Nothing impure or unclean has every entered my mouth.”***

The old food laws taught the Jews about being different from others. So for every shopping trip, every meal being prepared, every day's farming and every trip to the temple, there were regulations that separated this from that. These regulations were a visual aid of the uncleanness of what sin does for you. So

once Jesus came to die and deal once for all with the uncleanness of our sin, there was no longer any need for the visual aid. That's why Jesus declared that all food was clean in Mark 7.

But these laws had become so ingrained and embedded as part of the Jewish way of life and as we heard earlier they had been twisted and distorted leading to a strong racial prejudice. Peter like the rest of them had imbibed this prejudice and so God had to give him the same vision twice more to ram it home.

Next Peter tells them and us v11-14 about **The Visit**. There's a knock at the door and some Gentiles are there. Somehow, v12, God the Holy Spirit told him it was ok to go with them – so much so that he even enters Cornelius' house.

In v13-14 Cornelius shares his side of the story and this emphasises yet more how the whole thing was organised by God.

Then in 15-18 we finally have **The Verdict**. Peter preaches the gospel and as soon as Cornelius and the other Gentiles believe the message the Holy Spirit falls on them just as he had come on the first Jewish believers in Acts 2. It was God's unmistakable way at this key epoch-making moment of marking them and saying loud and clear that they were now His. They were as fully saved as the Jewish believers.

Cornelius & co were just as precious and clean in God's sight as the Jewish believers. Peter saw this and gave his verdict, v17: ***“So if God gave them the same gift as he gave us, who believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I to think that I could oppose God?”***

And wonderfully v18 when the head office at Jerusalem heard this, they too had their prejudice removed, v18: ***“they had no further objections and praised God saying, ‘So then, God has granted even the Gentiles repentance unto life.’”***

They came to realise and accept what Peter had back in 10:34: ***“I now realise how true it is that God does not show favouritism.”*** They realised that God wanted everybody to hear the gospel and that through faith in Christ the Gentiles were as equally saved and precious to God as the Jewish believers.

So what does this mean for us?

1st – we owe our salvation to this, so be thankful. Praise God that this obstacle was removed so that even Gentiles in Britain and all the other nationalities represented here tonight could hear and believe the good news and receive the forgiveness of sins. Be thankful!

2nd – we need to ponder our own prejudices. For Jewish Peter the sheet in the vision was full of unclean birds and animals, what would the sheet contain for us? What represents the prejudice that we hold deep down in our subconscious that causes us to regard one or other people group as beyond the bounds of God's grace?

Perhaps a skate board to represent rebellious youth culture, or a Zimmer frame to represent the elderly, for others it'll be an old school tie as a symbol of the upper classes or a DVD of Eastenders to represent the working-class.

Or think honestly about what sort of people you invite round to your home – or more tellingly what sort of people you don't invite round or who you wouldn't want your children to mix with and certainly not to marry.

Is there some prejudice holding us back from mingling with and befriending some types so that we don't have the chance to share the gospel with them. We must diagnose our prejudice no matter how slight it may be and turn from it.

For some people today the problem is nationalism. But there's no room for nationalism in our understanding of God's purposes for the evangelisation of the world.

The song Jerusalem is a great and stirring tune but it is full of British nationalism. The original poem by William Blake was intended to mock that British sense of superiority but when put to music by Parry in 1916 – it was intended to bolster national pride. "And did those feet in ancient time walk upon England's mountains green? And was the holy Lamb of God on England's pleasant pastures seen?" The sentiment is that Jesus was essentially English. There's to be no nationalism in our understanding, no racial or class snobbery.

The gospel is for everyone. 10:43 – ***“everyone who believes in Jesus receives forgiveness of sins”*** – EVERYONE!

So be thankful, cut out our prejudices and then thirdly that should enable us to get on with taking the gospel to everyone.

The population of the world is 6.7 billion, 2.7 billion of whom live in a people group that has not been reached. In other words 40% of people alive today are unreached.

It’s been said that the 19th Century was the great century of world evangelism but actually world evangelisation has only just started. International mission is not an optional extra for just the really keen Christian to be involved with. It is something that should be on all our hearts. We can all take an active interest in how our external mission partners are getting on and be praying for them. And perhaps use something like Operation World where you can pray intelligently for a different country each day. Let’s be a church that prays for and preaches to all nations.

It’s been encouraging to have the opportunity to start leading some assemblies at Hauxton Primary School. God has opened that door to the gospel and let’s be praying for those children and their teachers as the gospel goes out there.

Let’s be praying for one another as we spend time with non-believers at the office or the school gate.

The gospel is for all kinds of people. So as you head to the office tomorrow morning, Hashid who sits at the desk next to you, that Oxford-educated, highly-intelligent, very charming, Muslim – if he will only turn and believe then he too will receive forgiveness of sins.

Or Samantha that ardent feminist in the HR department, she too will know God’s love and mercy if she would only trust in Christ.

Or Chris and James dropping their young child off at school, proud as punch – dads of their adopted daughter Sarah – a gay couple. If they repent and believe the good news they too will receive God’s forgiveness. First though all these people need to hear the good news and God has placed us amongst them so that that can happen!

God offers forgiveness of sins to anyone, to Guardian-reading Gwyneth or to Telegraph-reading Thomas, to English or Ethiopian, upper class or working class, gay or straight, Sikh or secular humanist, Muslim or materialist.

10:34 - ***“God does not show favouritism”***; rather he opens his arms to all kinds of people and therefore we should do likewise and not let prejudice or political-correctness for that matter stop us from telling the whole world the good news.

None of our friends is beyond the reach of God’s grace – so why not invite them in 2 weeks time to Back to Church Sunday or to the guest services either end of the October Week of Outreach or offer to read the Bible with them yourself. They may not believe – there’s a strong chance of that but none of them is beyond the scope of God’s grace.

In a minute we’re going to turn toward the Lord’s Supper. As we eat the bread and drink the wine perhaps meditate amongst other things that if there was any other way that a person could be saved God would not have sent his one and only Son – the precious Lamb of God to die on the Cross. That is the only way a person can be saved. Wonderfully that salvation is open to all – but people will only hear if we tell them.

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.)