**Openness to God and Others Acts 10 9.5.2021**

A parent’s or grandparent’s open arms keen to embrace a child is a classic image of openness and love, warmth, acceptance and embrace.

In writing about the passage we have just read James Dunn says, it is “the interaction between the open heart and the open hearted God which matters, however it comes about and however it may be expressed.”[[1]](#footnote-1)

In this story we encounter two primary characters, Peter and Cornelius, men with open hearts. Each enters the story at a time of prayer. Their praying was not purely a list of requests to God, their praying demonstrated an openness to God, through which God could speak to them.

**How does God speak to us?**

These men chose to place themselves in a context where they could hear what God was saying to them.

Peter was hungry at the time, perhaps he had been fasting, this was a common practice in Judaism, a common indicator of devotion to God. Though food was being prepared for him, he chose to focus his attention on God. Hunger is a powerful force in our lives, but he resolved to resist this force.

He received a vision from God regarding food, but responded with indignation. This vision featured food, animals, that he could never imagine eating. It cut across “traditional and deeply rooted convictions which had completely governed his life until this moment.”[[2]](#footnote-2) Food regulations were an unquestionable part of who he was and how he lived, it was unthinkable to just abandon them. So his praying clearly becomes a conversation with God. To the command, “Get up, Peter; kill and eat”[[3]](#footnote-3) he replies indignantly “Surely not Lord”[[4]](#footnote-4) However God responds with equal and compelling fervour, “What God has called clean you must not call profane”.[[5]](#footnote-5)

Conversation with God, on occasions, can certainly issue in us the feeling of being chastised. Peter’s openness to God needed to encompass a willingness to obey God.

I recall during the process of discerning my call to train as a Minister of the Word, some defining conversations with God when I became abundantly aware, that my persistent and extensive resistant arguments were being answered or over-ruled. I perceived that any further arguments on my part would indicate an unwillingness to obey. I now knew God was calling me to this, the only question now was how would I respond.

Cornelius, a God-fearing Gentile, who was generous, respected, just and who embodied integrity, was also praying. He experiences a vision of an angel who gave him specific instructions, and he obeyed.

God speaks to us in a variety of ways, for Paul an image spoke powerfully to him for Cornelius it was again a vision, and an angelic voice. For me there was no vision, but again after a time of prayer, there was an irresistible sense of specific words, addressed personally and clearly to answer all my hesitations, and to provoke me to stop arguing and act in response to this call.

I am so glad that God finds diverse ways to communicate to each of us; ways which we can relate to, which grab our attention, which are sensitive to our unique personalities. The consistent prerequisite being an openness to take time to prayerfully listen to God.

**Why does God speak to us?**

We all face defining moments in our lives, some are expected and some strike like a lightning bolt. We recognise that our lives are a journey and that we are created to embrace this journey of growth and change. We are in a process of continual transformation, even our bodies alone point to this.

This story is a pivotal story in development of the early Christian church. This was a defining moment. The new movement had begun within Judaism, but this experience would change their identity as a movement. “The breakdown of the ethnic/religious boundary round Israel was indispensable and integral to the breakthrough of the gospel to the nations at large.”[[6]](#footnote-6)

God speaks powerfully to Peter through this experience. The story has been called the conversion of Peter, for though Cornelius also was converted, Peter’s self-understanding also had to be entirely re-configured. It took massive and repeated interventions of God before Peter was able to accept this change. Two visions, the obedience of Cornelius in following divine instructions, God’s Spirit speaking to Peter and encouraging his obedience,[[7]](#footnote-7) and finally his preaching being interrupted by the gift of God’s Spirit coming upon Cornelius and all who were present. “The Spirit ‘fell upon’ them, something ‘hit them’, there was a visible impact of invisible power.” [[8]](#footnote-8) This clear intervention of God was a powerful sign that this was part of God’s plan. God was active, God’s Spirit was working drawing others beyond the Israelites to follow Jesus.

The story reminds us to take care that we do not easily dismiss challenges that impact our long held positions or traditions?

Peter was finally able to own this change, he had opened himself to this radical transformation by God. His journey like our own involved ongoing growth and change throughout life. It reminded me of the wording on the grave of Ruth Graham, (wife of Billy Graham) taken from common road work signage it says, “End of construction. Thank you for your patience”.

**What does God say to us?**

We live in vastly different times to Peter. In multi-cultural communities, in a “global village” instantly linked by amazing tele-communications options. Yet the problems associated with racism have certainly not disappeared.

We are prone to favouring those who most resemble ourselves in culture, ethnicity, socio-economic status, personality, theology, values, lifestyle, the list seems endless.

The obvious message in this story to us, as to the people of its time, revolves around how truly welcoming are we, in our own living and in the life of our church community. Who would we welcome to our table? When did we last share a meal with people who were very different to ourselves? Sharing fellowship over a meal was a strong trait of the early Christian community, and recognising that all should be genuinely welcome caused some significant challenges to them, especially in their early days.[[9]](#footnote-9)

The gospel calls us to be generous and genuine in our welcome to all people. In the early centuries of the Christian church this became a defining characteristic of their communities. Emperor Julian in his letter to Arsacius, comments on “*the kindness of Christians to strangers,”* and states

*“For it is disgraceful when no Jew is a beggar and the impious Galileans [the name given by Julian to Christians] support our poor in addition to their own; everyone is able to see that our coreligionists are in want of aid from us.”*

Likewise we are called to regularly look again at what we are offering our community. What do we offer in the forms of times and places of generous welcome? Certainly our ANZAC Day hospitality and our involvement with Second Bite are times when we genuinely welcome our broader community. The use of our property by others can be an avenue for hospitality, but admittedly we also gain revenue from many of these groups. We are challenged to look at the generosity of our attitudes of welcome to others, particularly those very different to ourselves. We are called to look at the practical ways in which we welcome others. How welcoming are the physical features of our buildings? Are they comfortable and inviting?

During my study week I was exploring books offering reflections on the church of our times and making suggestions regarding what people may be interested in the church offering, in the 21st century. A strong theme was offering a place of welcome and belonging, a place of genuine community, a place where followers of Jesus meet as a family and extend their embrace to any and all who may join them, a place where diversity is celebrated.

As James Dunn said, it is “the interaction between the open heart and the open hearted God which matters, however it comes about and however it may be expressed.”[[10]](#footnote-10)

1. James D. G. Dunn, *The Acts of the Apostles,* (Grand Rapids: Wm B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1996) 152 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Dunn, *The Acts of the Apostles,* 132 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Acts 10:13b NRSV [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Acts 10:14a NIV [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Acts 10:15b NRSV [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Dunn, *The Acts of the Apostles,* 139 [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Acts 10:19-20 NRSV [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Dunn, *The Acts of the Apostles,* 146 [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. The early church on numerous occasions needed to deal with issues around eating together as Jesus followers some Jews and some Gentiles, Acts 15:22-30; 1 Corinthians 8:4-13; Romans 14:13-23; Galatians 2:11-14 [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Dunn, *The Acts of the Apostles,* 152 [↑](#footnote-ref-10)