

20210402 - Easter 2021

In trying to get to grips with passages we may have listened to for such a long time, it's always useful to try to grasp the general context and then to picture the scene, I find.

What we now call Israel/Palestine was a collection of territories under various rulers but all without exception not independent nations as we would understand them, but very much ultimately under Roman control.

The Romans were as always very clever and allowed an elite to rule each little territory, thereby ensuring that the peace such as it was, was violently enforced. Just to make sure all was well, they also garrisoned soldiers at various places. Cornelius, a centurion in one such detachment was no-doubt a member of an auxiliary unit. These were not formal legionaries in the sense of being campaigning soldiers, but more like paramilitaries and in this case Roman citizens possibly of Italian extraction.

Cornelius was therefore about as far from being an observant Jew as you could imagine; one of the hated occupiers and culturally somewhat like chalk to cheese. The early Christians were already held under great suspicion by the Jewish authorities as witnessed by the persecution following Stephen the Martyr. Now with this "Cornelius Event" they were to show that they were being called by God to be a very different people.

So this is something of the context surrounding the Apostle Peter's visit to Cornelius which is what our Acts reading is reporting. As we listen to Peter's

speech, we get a sense of just how radical this all was even to him. The Jewish nation counted it as an absolute rule that they should be separate from all other peoples and here Peter was being commanded by the Holy Spirit to mix with them.

If Peter was going to answer the question "Who is my neighbour?", which Jesus answered by telling the parable of the Good Samaritan, then he would have to declare that 'neighbour' included Roman soldiers and their households as well. It was all so unexpected.

Its at this point that we cut-over to John's account of the Resurrection. As I have remarked in the past, John's Gospel starts in that magnificent manner 'In the beginning was the Word', re-forging the account of the Creation of the Universe in Genesis, but when it comes to the account of what happened on that first Resurrection Sunday, its all over the place. We go from a formally structured Gospel with so many memorable passages and events, to something which is plainly a strictly eye-witness account.

And that account mentions Peter, and it's this account that Peter is relaying to Cornelius and his household; Peter was there and he is telling them how it was. The point is that the Resurrection account is powering the encounter with the Romans occupiers; this is the narrative that Peter has to offer and its this that Cornelius wants to hear.

Peter starts to repeat his account, no-doubt something he had done a lot by then and suddenly these foreigners receive the stunning force of the Holy

Spirit coming upon them. For Cornelius and his household and friends, this is a fantastic life-changing event. Yet for Peter and for the progress of the Gospel, something even more important has happened. 'Neighbour' has been re-interpreted again to include 'foreigner' and indeed "someone I don't want to be with" and it is this encounter with its stunning visitation by the Spirit, that now results in the Gospel message starting to be proclaimed way beyond the borders of Israel and its people.

So for us today the message is the same: repeating and living the Resurrection account, results in the family of those of the Christian faith expanding; it is as we meet with and welcome those we might not always even get on with, that the Gospel is effective and many come to Faith. Jesus actually predicted this would happen because He says in John 14 that "you will know they are Christians by their love". What's remarkable about that very sentence is that the very word "Christian" did not exist during the time of Jesus amongst us; it only started to be used after the Gospel reached Ephesus. So when John wrote his Gospel perhaps towards the end of the first century, when He reported what Jesus said, he used the by-then standard word for followers of Jesus, the title 'Christian' and in a curious bit of journalism was in effect saying, I know its a fact that when we love each other, people know we are followers of Jesus. John was reporting on something that was common knowledge by the end of that first century, that when Christians had regard and love for each other, those outside know they are Christians.

We are hugely blessed with a great church family in our benefice, but this Easter 2021 its good to know that the Holy Spirit works with and through our

good relationships with each other, to community His gospel to people, the gospel of His love and all because Jesus rose from the dead some 2000 years ago.