

“You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” Acts 1:8

Looking at an artist’s pencil sketches, it is difficult to get an idea of the bigger picture that is in their head. The Old Testament story and prophets include glimpses of God’s intention to bless the nations through God’s people. People such as Rahab and Ruth were just some of the non-Jews who were integrated into God’s chosen people.

As Paul prayed for the Ephesians, he wanted them to “understand, as all God’s people should, how wide, how long, how high, and how deep his love is (even) though it is too great to understand fully.” He realised that God, “through his mighty power at work within us, (is able) to accomplish infinitely more than we might ask or think.” (Eph 3: 14-21 NLT) Sometimes, our prayers are limited by the extent of what we think God can and wants to do. In an invitation to salvation, God tells us: ““My thoughts are nothing like your thoughts,” says the LORD. “And my ways are far beyond anything you could imagine. For just as the heavens are higher than the earth, so my ways are higher than your ways and my thoughts higher than your thoughts.”” (Is 55:3-13 NLT)

PRAY: Ask God to give you insight and revelation - and a vision of your place in his mission in this world.

ICEBREAKER: Last week, we asked: what things do we really hope that God wouldn’t ever ask us to do or where we hope that God wouldn’t ask us to go. Today: What would God have to do – for you to be willing to be obedient to something God has laid on your heart to do – when you might have a major underlying fear of doing that?

READ: Acts 10:1-23

This passage marks the start of the mission by the Christian church to the ‘Gentiles’ or the nations, and shifts the focus in the rest of the book of Acts. After the Jews had returned from exile, Judaism had become particularly legalistic, particularly under the Pharisees who espoused piety/ purity and resisted the influences of Greek and Roman culture. In the early days of the Christian church, Jewish believers were still observing Jewish customs.

Cornelius was not only part of the Roman army, but was also based in a city named after and dedicated to Caesar.

- In Acts 10:1-8, 22 - what is unique about Cornelius? How did God respond to his devotion?
- In Acts 10:24-33, Cornelius obeyed what the angel of God told him to do. But, what did he do that went further/ beyond that and showed he realised this supernatural event was of critical importance?

In Acts 10:11-13, Peter was commanded in the vision to kill and eat the animals. Some of these were ok to eat per Jewish law and some were strictly prohibited. (Lev 11)

- Why do you think Peter believed it was so important to not defile himself/ be ‘clean’? Why would this command have offended his conscience?
- Peter’s response is essentially: “I’m a good person” and “I haven’t and would never do that sort of thing.” Does his response suggest that Peter saw himself as racially or morally superior to Gentiles? How does his attitude contrast with teaching that sin defiles all of us? (e.g. Rom 3:23, 1 Jn 1:8-9)

Jesus had rubbed shoulders with many of the ‘great unwashed’ of humanity: e.g. lepers, a haemorrhaging woman, Samaritans, a man possessed by a demon who hung round a grave-yard and touching a dead person. When a leper pleaded with Jesus to make him clean and Jesus declared “I am willing ... Be clean”. (Luke 5:12-13) Jesus also taught that our food habits and personal hygiene are not the things that (spiritually) defile us. Rather, it is because of our words, thoughts and evil acts. (Matt 15:11, 18; Mk 7:20-23)

In Zech 13:1, the prophet anticipated a day when a fountain will be opened ... to cleanse ... from sin and impurity." Sin was any intentional or unintentional wrong-doing against God or others; impurity was defilement (e.g. due to childbirth, from burying a corpse) rendering a person unable to worship. Ezekiel also prophesied of cleansing water and an outpouring of the Spirit, rendering us clean. (Ezek 36:24-32)

Gradually, the church recognised that Jesus' work cleanses us not only from all sin (1 Jn 1:7), but also from the guilt of sin (Heb 9:14, 10:22) and this cleansing means we can have access to God with confidence. (Heb 4:16) Both Jews and Gentiles alike are sinful. Similarly, both are made right with God by faith in Jesus. (Rom 3:21-31)

God's response to Peter's claim to personal piety was blunt: "Do not call anything impure that God has made clean/ pure." (Acts 10:15) To make sure Peter got the message, the vision and message was repeated.

Read the following verses, then ask two questions: how did God act/ intervene? How did Peter, Paul and/ or the early church interpret God's action, about how God was treating non-Jews?

- Acts 10:29-35
- Acts 10:44-48
- Acts 11:12-18
- Acts 13:45-48
- Acts 15:7-13, 19-21

Peter and John recognised that the Holy Spirit was at work in and among the Gentiles, bringing them to faith and endowing them with spiritual gifts. This indicated that God did not discriminate between Jews and Gentiles. Peter said that to oppose this work would be to oppose God (11:17) The ministry to Gentiles, however, resulted in criticism – firstly against Peter and John, then later, Paul. Two things made the apostles resolute and helped the apostles stay faithful to this ministry, even in the face of criticism: God had directly spoken into their lives, calling them to minister to the Gentiles, and because they saw evidence of the Spirit's work in Gentile believers.

The inclusion of Gentiles into the early church was not without issues. The first issue that the church faced – and settled – at the Jerusalem Council in Acts 15, was to what extent Gentile believers had to adopt Jewish laws. Recognising God accepted Gentiles by faith, and that this fulfilled God's bigger plan back in the Old Testament, the Council decided that the Jewish initiation rite of male circumcision was not mandatory for Gentile believers.

As Gentiles were incorporated into the Christian community, many Jewish believers were concerned about the ongoing/ future status of the Jewish nation, plus the Old Testament covenants and promises. The apostle Paul devoted three chapters of his letter to the Roman church to address this issue. (Rom 9-11) Paul argues, though, that, the 'people of God' is akin to an ancient but fruitful and cultivated olive tree. By faith, the Gentiles (most of us) are akin to wild branches, now grafted into this tree, while Jews who reject Christ are branches, cut off.

- READ Rom 9:21-26. Paul refers to verses in Hosea which were promises intended for God's people. What names are given and applied to both Jewish and Gentile believers? How do these names make you feel?

REFLECT ON THE FOLLOWING QUOTE – What challenges, encourages, worries or makes you nervous about this quote? Which group of people do you have a particular burden to pray for and reach out to?

"Mission is to leave one's own geographic or cultural Christian world in order to enter the world of even the poorest and the most unchristian. The non-believer, the fallen away Christian, the poor and the oppressed are always the subject of missionary love, and the more mission leaves its own world in search of them, the more it is radicalised and the closer it approaches the model and desire of Christ." Segundo Galilea

PRAY: "God give us ears to listen and then the fearlessness to act. Forgive us for our pride, lack of trust, control and laziness. Let us move with your Spirit who takes us into the wild places that we would sometimes rather avoid."

<http://www.karinakreminski.com.au/2016/03/21/breaking-through-the-culture-of-fear-in-evangelicalism/>