

Sunday 7 August 2016

Otumoetai Baptist Church

The Book of Acts: Acts Chapter 10

Do not consider anything unclean that God has declared clean

(BLACK) Acts 10:9-15

I was living up in Auckland about ten years ago and with the church I was attending up there, there was an opportunity to go on a missionary trip to China and see what life is like over there.

(SLIDE 1)

So I managed to raise some funds and four of us from Auckland International Church went over to Hong Kong, met up with a sister church over there, and the people from Hong Kong became our guides into China.

We were only in the outskirts of China, but I got to see first-hand what life was like for people living there. For instance we visited a University over there, we went to a leprosy colony and took medical and food supplies to people living there. We saw true savage poverty from the time we landed in China until the time we departed.

We also had some interesting and comical experiences over there. For instance I don't know if you've ever had or paid for a

foot massage, and if you have had one I don't know if you've ever had one in China!

IF you can picture it, there was a group of about 16 of us in one room and we were all having foot massages. There were shouts of pain and agony, squeals of delight, and myself and others trying to be silent and act all tough. I mean, who wants to admit you are in pain during a relaxing (yeah right!) foot massage.

But for the poverty we experienced and the pain we and I endured through foot massages, I don't remember my time in China for those reasons. It is the people that I remember. And one person in particular, and the impact meeting her had on me.

See, one of the groups of people we met were Chinese woman in their fifties and over who lived together, ate together, walked to church together, and shared the highs and lows of life together.

This may seem like an ordinary group of people, but that suddenly changes when you find out that most of them have been both blind and deaf from birth.

These were people who society shunned its face at. People who were living in terrible conditions. People who faced adversity every single day of their lives.

People who knew what it meant to suffer physically, socially and emotionally. And yet people who were more joyful than any other people I have met before or since.

There was one woman in particular. She would sort of be to the side of the group, kind of on her own. People in our group would be spending time with and talking to the ladies, but I noticed that this woman wasn't really engaging with or being engaged with by our group.

As I looked at this woman, I wondered what her life had been like. What she had had to put up with. What she had had to give up. The dirty names and things that she had been called by people. The isolation she must feel. Never being able to see or hear. That in itself must be incredibly frightening.

It would be an understatement to say I felt absolute sympathy for her and I desperately wanted to reach out to her.

And so I did. I went up to her, sat beside her, and put my arm around her. In hindsight this must have been pretty unsettling for her and I could tell that she was uncomfortable. So I started praying and asking God to comfort her.

And then what happened next is pretty much indescribable. It

was like God himself was right there. In that moment He showed up unexpectedly and the love and peace that I experienced then was like heaven had come to earth.

It was soul-refreshing and all the barriers that were between myself and this woman had been broken down. We were both children of a living God and we were experiencing his love and mercy in a fresh and wonderful way.

As I reflect back on this experience, I often think about this woman and what her life is like now. See, to me she is a perfect example of who God is referring to when He said to Peter, "Do not consider anything unclean that I have declared clean."

(SLIDE 2)

This woman was an outcast. People from the outside would not come into her world. She was broken, damaged, best to be left to herself.

But that's not how God sees her, or me, or you, or anyone. "Do not call anything unclean that I have declared clean."

We've been looking at the book of Acts for some time now and one theme of the book is the church on a Mission.

(SLIDE 3)

We've heard from different speakers here about the early church how it grew, about the different people that were part of it, about the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, about the suffering of the early Christians, and last week we heard about the life of one Saul, who had a supernatural encounter with the living Christ and went from Saul the murderer and Christian-hater to Paul the missionary and Christ-lover.

As you read through the book of Acts you see the canvas widening and becoming richer, as we discover more about Christ's church, what it stands for and who it is exactly for.

We see a man named Peter who preached to the people in Judea and Jerusalem, which resulted in 3000 people joining the early church.

Read on and we see a man named Phillip who preached to the people in Samaria and then to an Ethiopian official, which resulted in the gospel going out to parts of Africa.

And then we see Paul, who encountered Christ, was converted to Christianity and started preaching Christ to the Jews in the local synagogues.

God was on the move. And he was using his people to fulfil his

mission. His mission for the entire world - not just for his chosen people of Israel.

And that brings us to our story for today.

See, we come back to our good friend Peter. You've heard a bit about him during this series and Viv did an excellent job a few weeks of examining the man and imagining how he came to be called by Jesus himself to feed his sheep, to look after his brothers and sisters in the church, to be the rock.

Peter's taken a bit of a backward step during the last few experiences in the book of Acts, but he's still very much working and sharing the gospel wherever he goes. We're going to look at Acts chapter 10 this morning, but let's quickly locate where our good friend Peter is at.

At the end of chapter nine, he is in a place called Joppa - If Joppa rings a bell for you, it might be that because about 800 years earlier, Joppa was the seaport city where Jonah "fled from the Lord" because as a Jew he was repulsed at God's call to preach to the pagan Ninevites (Jonah 1:30). Luke puts Peter in this same city and he gives him a similar call. Only Peter didn't make the same mistake as Jonah, but that's getting ahead of ourselves.

Well, here in Joppa there is a woman called Tabitha who becomes sick and ultimately dies. Peter is sent for immediately and when he arrives he gets everyone to leave the upper room, where her body is. He says to her, “Tabitha, arise” and she opens her eyes. He goes back down to give everyone the good news, and many people come to believe in Peter’s God.

We don’t get much of Peter’s reactions but we do learn that he stayed many days in Joppa with Simon a tanner, or a leather-worker.

This will become more important as we read on, so let’s begin at Acts chapter ten verse 1, and we’re going to read through to verse 33 to get the big picture of the passage:

(SLIDE 4)

Peter and Cornelius

There was a man in Caesarea named Cornelius, who was a captain in the Roman army regiment called “The Italian Regiment.” He was a religious man; he and his whole family worshiped God. He also did much to help the Jewish poor people and was constantly praying to God.

It was about three o'clock one afternoon when he had a vision, in which he clearly saw an angel of God come in and say to him, “Cornelius!” He stared at the angel in fear and said, “What is it,

sir?”

(SLIDE 5)

The angel answered, “God is pleased with your prayers and works of charity, and is ready to answer you. And now send some men to Joppa for a certain man whose full name is Simon Peter. He is a guest in the home of a leather worker (tanner) named Simon, who lives by the sea.” Then the angel went away, and Cornelius called two of his house servants and a soldier, a religious man who was one of his personal attendants. He told them what had happened and sent them off to Joppa.

(SLIDE 6)

The next day, as they were on their way and coming near Joppa, Peter went up on the roof of the house about noon in order to pray. He became hungry and wanted something to eat; while the food was being prepared, he had a vision. He saw heaven opened and something coming down that looked like a large sheet being lowered by its four corners to the earth. In it were all kinds of animals, reptiles, and wild birds. A voice said to him, “Get up, Peter; kill and eat!”

(SLIDE 7)

But Peter said, “Certainly not, Lord! I have never eaten anything ritually unclean or defiled.”

The voice spoke to him again, "Do not consider anything unclean that God has declared clean." This happened three times, and then the thing was taken back up into heaven.

While Peter was wondering about the meaning of this vision, the men sent by Cornelius had learned where Simon's house was, and they were now standing in front of the gate. They called out and asked, "Is there a guest here by the name of Simon Peter?"

(SLIDE 8)

Peter was still trying to understand what the vision meant, when the Spirit said, "Listen! Three men are here looking for you. So get ready and go down, and do not hesitate to go with them, for I have sent them." So Peter went down and said to the men, "I am the man you are looking for. Why have you come?"

"Captain Cornelius sent us," they answered. "He is a good man who worships God and is highly respected by all the Jewish people. An angel of God told him to invite you to his house, so that he could hear what you have to say."

(SLIDE 9)

Peter invited the men in and had them spend the night there. The next day he got ready and went with them; and some of the believers from Joppa went along with him. The following day he arrived in Caesarea, where Cornelius was waiting for him,

together with relatives and close friends that he had invited.

As Peter was about to go in, Cornelius met him, fell at his feet, and bowed down before him. But Peter made him rise. "Stand up," he said, "I myself am only a man."

(SLIDE 10)

Peter kept on talking to Cornelius as he went into the house, where he found many people gathered. He said to them, "You yourselves know very well that a Jew is not allowed by his religion to visit or associate with Gentiles. But God has shown me that I must not consider any person ritually unclean or defiled. And so when you sent for me, I came without any objection. I ask you, then, why did you send for me?"

(SLIDE 11)

Cornelius said, "It was about this time three days ago that I was praying in my house at three o'clock in the afternoon. Suddenly a man dressed in shining clothes stood in front of me and said: 'Cornelius! God has heard your prayer and has taken notice of your works of charity. Send someone to Joppa for a man whose full name is Simon Peter. He is a guest in the home of Simon the tanner of leather, who lives by the sea.' And so I sent for you at once, and you have been good enough to come. Now we are all here in the presence of God, waiting to hear anything that the Lord has instructed you to say."

We're going to pause here before we're ready for Peter to tell us what he has to say and were going to look at what's going on in this encounter.

We have two people – Cornelius and Peter – who each have different visions from the Lord.

Cornelius is a religious man and a Gentile. Peter is a Christian and a Jew. They are not meant to mix together. In fact, as Peter says to Cornelius, a Jewish person going into the home of a Gentile was not allowed and against their religious law in those days.

So what's God up to here? Why is he drawing them together?

Some of you might know that God doesn't follow human rules, our rules.

He shows up where you least expect him to – like in a dirty manger with unclean animals.

He hangs out with those people you least expect him to – like with prostitutes, tax collectors and sinners.

He says things you least expect him to – like “sell all you have and give the money to the poor”, or “Do not consider anything unclean that I have declared clean.”

It's interesting to contrast where both Cornelius and Peter are,

what they are doing, and how each responds when they have their visions.

Cornelius is at home and he is praying, and when he sees the angel he responds with fear, “What is it, sir?” Very respectful isn't he?!

Peter is on the roof top of the home of Simon the tanner and he is praying too. (Coincidence – I think not.) Peter responds with indignation, “Certainly not, Lord! I've never eaten anything ritually unclean or defiled.”

Translation: “I've never put anything into my body that is unclean. I've followed the Jewish laws all my life. Why would I want to do anything different now?”

It clearly took a while for Peter to get the message, as he received the same vision three times. I don't know about you, but you'd think he might get the hint after one heavenly vision.

But that's looking at this event through our twenty-first century Western world eyes.

See, for Peter following the Jewish laws and regulations was really about following the Lord Jesus. He was religious about his religion, if you like. So to Peter the Old Testament law – the first five books of the Bible – was the law he lived by.

And a huge part of this law was the stuff about food preparation and eating. Do not eat anything unclean.

It's important to grasp how serious this issue was for Peter. It could be seen in the same vein that some today feel about the likes of abortion or euthanasia or other areas of life that get people passionate about.

So that's one thing that's going on for Peter, the struggle within. And we know he was struggling as the Bible says twice that he is trying to understand what the visions meant. It's like his world has been ripped open and he's wondering what's right and wrong.

The other thing going for Peter has to do with the location of where he is at. It's no coincidence that Luke the author writes three times that Peter is staying with Simon the tanner.

Ironically, a tanner was constantly dealing with dead animals and it was one of the most unclean trades in any ancient society, because the nature of their work kept them in a state of both physical and ritual uncleanliness (Lev 11:35).

A tannery was seen in the same category as a bathhouse or public urinal; and a tanner was lumped together with someone

“who is afflicted with boils, or who collects dog excrement.”
Charming aye!?

Because of the stench of the tanner's shop, most towns required that the tanner had to live on the outskirts of town, downwind!

The filth and the stench would have been awful. Just imagine how Simon looked and smelled at the end of a hot day. He would have been the object of social disdain. Almost anyone would have felt superior to him.

Now here is the important point: This occupation was regarded with disgust by the Jews. So the fact that Peter was willing to stay and associate with a tanner reveals that he, unlike most other Jews, was already altering his views with reference to the Old Testament ceremonial laws.

Peter sharing hospitality with Simon is significant and echoes how his master and Rabbi lived. Just like Jesus, he is eating and drinking and socialising with the outcast. While tanners are never included in the list of outsiders with whom Jesus eats, they might very well be in the same category as tax collectors and prostitutes. The kind of people Jesus hung out with.

And notice Luke's irony. It's in the home of Simon the tanner, a Gentile who handled animal carcasses every day, where Peter the conscientious, dedicated Jew had his vision of — surprise! — unclean animals.

Through these visions, Peter learns that even though the religious laws forbid Jews to associate with Gentiles, "God has declared them clean."

It is therefore a little curious that Peter hesitates when he is given the vision by God and this shows just how far Jews and Gentiles were separated culturally. Peter has no problem staying in the home of a tanner who was unclean, yet he hesitates to enter the home of a Gentile God-fearer, someone who was likely more "clean" than the tanner, with respect to the Law.

The difference, of course, is that even if Cornelius was a God-Fearing man, he was still an uncircumcised Gentile. And as such, an outcast.

(SLIDE 12)

I want to tell you about another outcast. His name is Rob. Rob lived a pretty hard life. He worked hard and he drank hard. His first marriage ended in spectacular fashion. His second marriage was extremely rocky and rather than love each other, he and his wife often seemed to barely tolerate each other.

Rob didn't have many friends. He didn't seem to make time for them and to be honest, no-one made much time for him either.

Rob would often sit in his garage drinking and smoking. His life fading away before him.

One day one of his neighbours thought "I need to reach out to this man and befriend him." So this person did.

He would go over and visit Rob – which was often quite awkward but he persisted.

He would mow his lawns for him. He would watch a game of rugby on the TV with him and his wife. He would try and spend time with him and initiate conversations about his past, what his life had been like, the things he was happy about, things he struggled with. But this was hard work.

This person didn't give up but did struggle. He desperately wanted to bring God into the conversation and relationship, but every time there might have been an opportunity he lacked the courage or wisdom to do so.

Well, time marched on and Rob suffered a heart attack and ended up in hospital. The doctors and medical staff did all they could for Rob but it wasn't enough.

Sadly and regrettably, Rob died.

There weren't many people who came to his funeral and all in all it was a very sombre affair.

To this day, that person regrets having not talked to Rob more about Jesus and the life and acceptance that He offers to those of us who are outcasts and feel like we don't fit in.

I know this because I am that person. And I live with this regret. And it pushes and encourages me to grab hold of opportunities to talk to people, all people, about spiritual stuff and the God who loves them more than they can imagine.

Do not consider anything unclean that God has called clean.

I think we are ready to hear Peter's response now, Acts 10 verses 34-43:

(SLIDE 13)

Peter began to speak:

"I now realize that it is true that God treats everyone on the same basis. Those who fear him and do what is right are acceptable to him, no matter what race they belong to.

You know the message he sent to the people of Israel, proclaiming the Good News of peace through Jesus Christ, who is

Lord of all.

You know of the great event that took place throughout the land of Israel, beginning in Galilee after John preached his message of baptism.

(SLIDE 14)

You know about Jesus of Nazareth and how God poured out on him the Holy Spirit and power. He went everywhere, doing good and healing all who were under the power of the Devil, for God was with him.

We are witnesses of everything that he did in the land of Israel and in Jerusalem. Then they put him to death by nailing him to a cross.

But God raised him from death three days later and caused him to appear, not to everyone, but only to the witnesses that God had already chosen, that is, to us who ate and drank with him after he rose from death.

(SLIDE 15)

And he commanded us to preach the gospel to the people and to testify that he is the one whom God has appointed judge of the living and the dead.

All the prophets spoke about him, saying that all who believe in him will have their sins forgiven through the power of his name."

Peter laid out the gospel for Cornelius and his relatives and close friends. The message of love. The message of the suffering Saviour. The message of hope. The message for all people from all walks of life.

(SLIDE 16)

After this event, we read that the Holy Spirit comes down and fills all those who were listening to Peter's message.

God was breaking down barriers and the walls that divided Jews and Gentiles. God was showing up where people least expected Him to again. God was on the move.

Do not consider anything unclean that I have declared clean.

As we come to a conclusion this morning, when we think about Peter prior to this encounter, he would likely not have associated with Gentiles, even Gentile believers. It was against his religion and law.

But God got hold of him pretty spectacularly and had a message for him, and ultimately a message for us too. This message is:

“Now hold on Peter. My message of love, hope and reconciliation is not just for you Jewish people. It's for all people.

Even and especially for Gentiles.

Peter, this message is going to spread further than you can imagine. From Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, here in Caesarea, and even to a place called New Zealand, which hasn't even been discovered yet.

There will be people two thousand years from now that hear this message and are saved from their sins. People that you would have previously considered unclean. But I call them clean. And I don't make mistakes.

All those people who you would usually discard as outcasts, such as people of other faiths, races, sexual orientations, those who have mental health issues, those different to you: I sent my Son Jesus to die for them, for everyone, and I have declared them all clean and worthy of the price that He ultimately paid for them.

(SLIDE 17)

Peter, church – **do not consider anything or anyone unclean that I have declared clean.”**

Let's pray.

(Communion)