**20th July 2014**

**Acts 10.44-48;**

By a coincidence, or God’s providence we should say, this passage in Acts 10 was featured in my daily bible reading notes this week from IBRA. Tim Yau was sharing how the week before he was ordained as an Anglican priest he went on a semi silent retreat. On his ordination day he went to smarten up and thought he could fit a quick haircut before the ceremony started. He strode into town in his new clerical shirt and dog collar and found the nearest barber’s and sat in the char. The cape was wrapped around him and then came the questions: ‘So you’re a vicar? What does a vicar do? Why are you a vicar? What is the gospel in a nutshell?’ He says ‘I had a rapt audience who ewer genuinely interested and all I kept thinking was ‘I shouldn’t really be here; I’ve got somewhere else I should be’.

Tim comments that Peter, too was distracted. God had shown him a vision of the kingdom and he was trying to make sense of this new information. He found himself summoned by a Gentile, a non-Jew, someone whom kit was culturally taboo to mix and, to top it, and Cornelius was an agent of Rome – the occupying enemy of the Jews. But he wanted to know the gospel wonder if Peter was thinking, ‘I shouldn’t be here; I’ve got somewhere else I should be.’ Nevertheless, that’s exactly where God did want him to be, and that encounter helped him make sense of the vision God had revealed to him: the kingdom is open to all.

This passage is about having your eyes opened by God’s initiative and grace and the work of the Holy Spirit. It is about change, changing views and changing beliefs.

David Cameron changed his cabinet this week – it was the removal of middle aged men that caught the headlines in the reshuffle. It was an attempt to freshen up the frontbench with new ideas and vision in time for next year’s general election.

I have to say, the more I consolidate my middle age the more I can hear myself becoming a grumpy old man. I hear myself bemoaning these new-fangled ideas. Why can’t they keep things as they are? I sense a nostalgia for the past – the good old days. Maybe now I am in middle age I’ve worked out how I like things and I’m not for changing. Change can be so bewildering. The fast rate of technological change creates enormous stress, particularly for those who are trying to keep up or hold down jobs and fear getting left behind. It would be nice to have certain things in life that are unchangeable and yet the reality is that there are very few things in life which don’t change.

Even faith, what you believe, may change. Our Bible passage today from the book of Acts tells of the Spirit's direct interventions to unpick Peter's limiting certainties and involve him in the wonder of God's welcome and God’s new work.

**Acts 10.44-48**is the climax of a story of central importance in the unfolding drama of the book of Acts. It's so important to Luke that it is retold (11.1-18) immediately after its first full telling (10.1-48). This experience of God's Spirit at work will be relied upon by Peter as his core argument at the Council of Jerusalem (15.8-9) – proof positive that God would have the Church welcome Gentiles into fellowship without requiring the adoption of the outward signs, customs and observances by which Jewish believers normally demonstrated their faith (most notably male circumcision).

Here is a brief summary:

First, the God-fearing centurion Cornelius (a high status, wealthy Roman) has a vision telling him to send to Joppa and ask for Peter (lodging with a low-status tanner) to come and preach. Then Peter has this thrice-repeated troubling dream that unpicks one of the basic religious assumptions of his Galilean peasant inheritance. Without these dreams Peter would have refused any request to meet with Gentiles (10.28), yet even as he tried to make sense of his dreams, the messengers arrive. So he goes with them, preaches a bold message about this inclusive God who shows 'no partiality' and is gloriously interrupted by God's Spirit being 'poured out' on the Gentile members of Cornelius' household.

Peter then responds by doing two things: he baptises Gentiles and eats with them. God's Spirit has engineered the breaking of an apparently immoveable barrier – albeit one that would continue to trouble at least some in the Church for a long time to come (11.1-3, 15.1-29, 21.17-26).

In his two-volume work Luke is adamant that this Gospel is truly and fully 'Jewish' in its roots (Luke 1-3), but equally it is truly and fully available now as good news for Gentiles or non-Jews (Acts 28.28). This story is a vital hinge moment in the case he is making. This is the second Pentecost. The first outpouring of the Holy Spirit was for the Jewish Christians. This one is for the Gentile Christians.

Notice that the biggest obstacle facing God's Spirit in this bold and gracious welcoming (in Jesus' name) is not the disinterest or resistance of outsiders, but the firm, inherited attitudes and understanding of committed believers who are convinced they know what is right, decent and permissible and who can or cannot be allowed in.

I can think of a church youth club that I know of in an inner city area. One of the older members of the congregation was widowed and childless and felt out of sympathy with the youth of her area. She felt vulnerable in her flat or out collecting her pension. When the youth group was about to fold for lack of a chaperone required by the Child Protection regulations, she agreed to do it – out of friendship for the youth group leader. She gave up her quiet Friday evenings with the TV for a headache – inducing evening with a gang of mainly boisterous lads. Gradually she grew into her new role and her new role grew her. Over time she became the unofficial grandma to many young people. Her gift with words made her useful for homework and her stories of wartime Britain contributed to many history projects. The youth group flourished and so did this lady. Initially entrenched in her attitudes to young people she found herself becoming open to change.

Peter’s attitude, belief and faith became open to change through dreams and visions, hearing God speak to him through these things. And then by seeing the results – lives changed, the Holy Spirit at work in people he thought the Holy Spirit wouldn’t be at work in. It wasn’t easy for him, or for the early church. And it isn’t easy for us today either.

The other week, the General Assembly of the United Reformed Church, our national decision making body, debated the issue of same sex marriage and whether they could authorise local churches to decide for themselves whether they would be willing to perform same sex marriages. As you can imagine the debate was very emotional and intense. It even got media coverage, the BBC for example was anticipating that we would be the first mainstream Christian denomination to allow same sex marriages in local churches that had agreed to hold them. But although the great majority of those present at general Assembly wanted to allow local churches to decide for themselves, as is the position with civil partnerships, there were some who dissented and so on consensus could be reached. Instead local churches are asked to consider this matter before March 2015 and feedback to the URC’s Mission council. So in the autumn we will give you the opportunity to discuss this mater and prayerfully consider the issues and principles at stake. There will be some written material available soon from our denomination to help local church members be informed about the topic. There is a document online that you can download in the meantime. I will ensure it gets put on the church website.

As many of you know I was, in my teenage and twenties, quite a homophobe. I thought homosexuals were the spawn of the devil. But when I discovered that two of my best friends came out as gay I had to seriously rethink my attitude. Both of them were committed Christians, trying to follow Jesus. It was clearly evident that the Holy Spirit was at work in their lives. How could this be I thought? A bit like a startled Peter when confronted by these Gentiles who he had regarded as unclean and unholy but who were now full of the Holy Spirit. It was a crucial moment for me in accepting gay people. I had to re-read my scriptures and look again at the faith I had protected and upheld.

Now having accepted that there are gay people and that God blesses them, how can they live blessed full lives, in the same way that heterosexuals, straight people can? The marriage debate is complex of course, about doctrine and definitions. If your definition of marriage is biological – it is about man and a woman and the option for procreation – then you will not agree to same sex relationships being called marriage. If your definition of marriage is based on covenanted faithful love, mutual support and companionship, then denying its status and benefits to same sex couples makes less sense. Suffice to say I am not going to go into this in any depth at this point in what’s left of this 20 minute sermon! Come along later in the year for a fuller discussion.

The church’s attitude to gay people is I believe a crucial stumbling block for the reception of the gospel in this country. A recent survey of young people aged 16-25 reported that when asked what comes into their mind when they think about church, the overwhelming response was ‘anti – gay’ and ‘prejudiced/bigots’.

Our perceived stance on sex and gays is a real gospel issue and it seems to be preventing people from hearing that gospel.

Whilst the Conservative Party realised ten years ago that the equal treatment of gay people had become a litmus test of basic human decency, and changed its view, it is a test that the church seems to be spectacularly failing in.

I sometimes wonder if Jesus was being ironic when he told his disciples that when he was gone he would leave them his Spirit who would be a ‘comforter’. When I read the pages of the New Testament the work of the Holy Spirit seems more like a disturber. The Spirit’s work with these Gentiles was certainly disturbing to the Jewish Christians. When things are up in the air, when there is disturbance, when your whole routine and relationships are threatened, sometimes this can be the Spirit’s work. Just when you want everything calm and settled, the wind blows and things move. Frustrating isn’t it?

This disturbance could be from God. Of course you need discernment, to read the signs. There’s a story about a man who was a farmer but who thought he should become a preacher. One day he was out ploughing corn when he saw the clouds in the sky above him form the letters ‘PC’. He immediately realised that the Lord was telling him to ‘Preach Christ’. So in obedience to the message, he gave up ploughing corn and started preaching Christ. Some of the congregation where he worshipped later suggested that perhaps what the Lord was really saying was ‘Plough Corn’.

We can all get it wrong. Sometimes the disturbance and change in our lives and in the life of the church is not from God.

The Reformation back in the 16th century was a huge disturbance and change in the life of the church and in its belief. As a Reformed Church we would argue that the Reformation was necessary and was from God. Perhaps the Catholic Church would disagree. The catchphrase of the Reformers was ‘semper reformanda’, translated from Latin means always changing, always reforming. The idea was to always try and get back to the original message, always trying to ensure that you never lost sight of being able to communicate the love of God through Christ.

Jesus came preaching and acing out a message of the kingdom of God that was not just for Israel but the whole world. It was a message of inclusion and acceptance and Jesus went out to those who were deemed unclean by his society, the prostitutes and the tax collectors for example.

In the frenzy of battle during WW II it obviously wasn’t always possible to return fallen soldiers to their homeland for burial. Many lay where they fell & died and are only remembered today by anonymous graves. Fearing this fate for one of their own, a US company fighting in the heart of the French countryside approached a Catholic priest to ask if they could bury their fallen colleague in the small, countryside graveyard attached to the church.

To their astonishment, the priest turned them down on 2 grounds – 1st of all the dead man wasn’t a Catholic and secondly there was no room in the already overcrowded graveyard.

With heavy hearts the soldiers were left with no other choice than to bury their friend just beyond the small wooden fence that marked the boundary of the cemetery & indicating its presence with a simple cross.

Within a couple of months the war was over & the company prepared for the journey home. But longing to say one last goodbye to their dead friend, they decided to return once more to the graveyard alongside which they had buried him. On arriving at the church, the cemetery looked much the same but, try as they might, as they walked around the perimeter of the fence they could not see any sign of the wooden cross they had left to mark the grave. Angered by the belief that the priest had removed even this simple memorial to their fallen buddy, they ran towards the church to challenge him.

However, as they approached, the priest came out to meet them. “I’m so glad you have returned,” he said in a welcoming voice. “After you left I was troubled by my decision. I saw the dignity with which you buried your friend & realised the anguish my decision had caused you. I couldn’t change the fact that the cemetery was full so I decided to solve the problem a different way. I’ve moved the boundary fence a meter or two so that your friend’s grave is now within the graveyard itself. I hope you can forgive me.”

Jesus’ mission and ministry in the world was about moving the boundary fence that the religious and social order of the day had built. This radical blueprint for the kingdom of God would mean the opportunity of a return from ‘exile’ for all peoples who were ‘lost’ or estranged from the Creator God, whatever their spiritual, social, ethnic or economic standing. Indeed it would ultimately include the whole of creation.

When our lives are dried up with lack of love for our neighbour, for the other, then the Spirit of God will disturb and seek to bring change. Disturbance in our churches that is from the Spirit will be marked by a deep prodding as to how we are expressing the gospel. May God grant us the openness to discern the work of His Spirit and the courage to respond.