

“How To Process Change In The Church”

23 May 2021 - Led by Rev. Sam Mawhinney

Welcome & Call To Worship

Hymn of Preparation: His Mercy Is More

Prayers of Adoration & Confession

Reading: Acts 11:1-18

Sermon:

The Covid pandemic has caused seismic (paradigm) shifts in every society of the world, in how life is and will be going forward. Change! The Church is not exempt from the new reality and we too are in a time or process of change. Change is demanding, understanding what the new reality is, considering the implications which take time, thought and response. For example, real or virtual presence: what is virtual presence? What aspects of church life can happen online, what cannot and why? Assuming both have their place, how do we work to blend both? Change can be daunting; nevertheless, for those of us who are Christians and believe in a sovereign, present God, we are reassured by the fact of the reality of God and we need to think through what He is doing, where is He leading, how we walk with Him, or to put it another way, to keep in step with the Spirit.

In our passage today, the early Church faces a pivotal moment in her life - Gentiles have just become Christians and been added to the Church (see Acts 10). With such hostility between Jews and Gentiles, there is lots to understand and consider, and much heart work to do when strong feelings emerge. So, as Peter reports back to the Church in Jerusalem in v.1-18 about this pivotal moment in the history and life of the Church, we see some principles that emerge to confirm God's involvement in the change, and to encourage and enable the Church to continue to walk and think through the direction God wants them to move in. These principles can help us in ARPC navigate this significant period in our life as we emerge from lockdown and with confidence take the opportunity for whatever change is needed.

The focus and the location of change is within our hearts. Some of us were able to attend the biblical counselling event on Thursday evening and I was reminded through what the speaker, Dr. Andrew Collins, said of the importance of the heart. Our hearts are the locus of God's work and biblical counselling focuses on the heart. This is our hope because of the power of Jesus' death, offering forgiveness and the presence of the Holy Spirit. There is available to us a way of love and power to affect change in our hearts.

Remembering the story of Peter and Cornelius in Acts 10, we remind ourselves that the change process is not primarily about structures, but about the human heart. I do not want us to underestimate the serious, significant, and sustained work God did in Peter's heart to enable him to be open to the possibilities of friendship, dialogue and being a spiritual brother with Cornelius and his family. The location of Jesus' presence is in our hearts and it is here that the ongoing work of gospel transformation takes place. In the process, God is purposeful and patient with us. He is strong, wise, and loving and His will is good, pleasing, and perfect. It is into that journey we are called, with significant outcomes for ourselves as

individuals and a church and society. So, let us look at Peter's reporting back of what God had done in saving the Gentiles and admitting them to the Church.

I. The Reaction of the Church (v.1-3)

News of Peter, Cornelius and Gentile inclusion to the Church has reached the Apostles and the brothers (family) of the churches throughout Judea, including Jerusalem. It is important that we appreciate how significant it is that Gentiles had received the word of God. 'Received' means not just to have heard, but to have believed the message and received the Holy Spirit, similar to what the Apostles had experienced, and was therefore an undeniable and unmistakable work of God. This fact (see 10:45) astonishes the six brothers from Joppa and Peter. It was undoubtedly a joyful time; they were praising God (v.46), but soon after the questions and implications arose. *Should they be baptised?* Peter argues and clearly states yes, they should be baptised since they have heard, believed, and received the Holy Spirit. Peter has participated in a significant moment and action in baptising Gentile believers. He returns to Jerusalem knowing they need to know and confirm the reality of what has just happened. No doubt it was a journey of both excitement and tension, but necessary because of the fact of the unity of the church.

As you see in v.2, not everyone agrees with Peter's actions. He is criticised for his association with the Gentiles (v.3). Peter is wise enough to realise that such a big step requires careful explanation, and he patiently explains precisely what has happened (v.4). The commentaries differ slightly about whether the opposition was because of a party within the Church, a right-wing group for which there is evidence, or maybe the opposition was more general and highlights the shock of Jewish believers having to deal with uncircumcised Christians. However, for the Church this is an important time, and to be fair, Peter and the Church emerge with great credit because of their willingness to explain and listen. Communication, willingness to listen, understanding the will of God and having an agreed mind are vital.

II. Careful Communication (v.4ff)

Peter tells the story of what happened, truthfully and personally (v.4).

A. What pictures has God given us?

Peter was given a vision of a large, white sheet with the mixture of kosher and non-kosher animals. He recalls that he looked into it (v.6) and he clarifies the shocking picture of four-footed animals, wild beasts, reptiles and birds and being told to kill and eat. It is a picture of the Church: the animals represent people, clean and unclean, Jews and Gentiles. Yes, it is shocking for a Jew. Peter has never contemplated the Church in this way before. It's outside his parameters and comfort; his natural response is "*surely not, Lord*" (v.8). If we are to understand the direction God wishes us to travel, we need to have a divine picture, a biblical picture or vision of what God wants. For example, God has given us a picture of the Church as a body. Each of us belong and have a gift and part to play. We need to consider how we walk in step with that picture. Where does it lead? What does it lead us away from? You can place this image over every aspect of what the church does, and it informs and directs. Leadership is likened to the head, service is likened to the functioning of a body, sin is likened to disease and the need for treatment by medicine or surgery, disunity to an autoimmune response, gifting is likened to

different parts of the body doing different things. Thinking of the body as plural, that is of a family (another picture in the Bible), then welcome, hospitality, care of other believers is mandated. We can have fun working with biblical pictures and applying them to different aspects of church life and I want to encourage us to have such thoughts and conversations.

B. What does the Bible say?

Peter tells the Church about the voice in the vision and the clear voice of the Holy Spirit (v.12). The word of God is vital in determining the direction of travel, of knowing if something is right and we have the Spirit-breathed word of God, to help us, to counsel us, to direct us, to assure us of what God is doing.

Whether you turn to the right or the left, your ears will hear a voice behind you saying, "this is the way, walk in it". Isaiah 30:21

And this is love: that we walk in obedience to his commands. As you have heard from the beginning, his command is that you walk in love. 2 John 1:6

His divine power has given us everything we need for life and godliness through our knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness. 2 Peter 1:3

What does the Bible say about clean and unclean foods? Well, undoubtedly Peter could recall the dispute and dialogue recorded in Mark 7 between Jesus and the Jewish leaders, called Pharisees, when they accused Jesus and His followers of not washing their hands before eating (not in the hygiene sense, but in the religious way to emphasise the cleanliness of them and the Jewish Kosher food). Jesus brilliantly showed that the source of sin was not external but the inner person, the heart; so, external influence does not make us clean or unclean. *"Don't you see that nothing that enters a man from the outside can make him unclean? For it does not go into his heart but into his stomach, and then out of his body."* (In saying this, Jesus declared all foods "clean") (Mark 7:18b-19). The word of God confirms the picture. It must do so, and we need to be reading and listening to all that God would have us hear, particularly from the Acts of the Apostles.

C. What is God doing? → Circumstances

When Peter obeyed, he discovered that God had been active, going before him, and Cornelius was totally prepared by God for the meeting, both in vision and word. Verse 14 gives further clarification of what Cornelius heard from God prior to the meeting with Peter: *"He (Peter) will bring you a message through which you and all your household will be saved."* It could not be clearer; Cornelius assembles his family and friends to hear about how to be saved. There is faith involved, but as we walk with God in keeping with His vision and in obedience to His word, we see His working and such 'coincidences' are so encouraging. These can be small encouragements, help in difficulty, or maybe bigger, even miraculous, things.

What is God doing in the area around this Church and how does the location of the church building, its structure, facilities and, importantly, the people we have indicate what God is doing? As an example, I would point to the work of international student ministry and how it developed. An area where we might look at more could be homelessness. We saw God work in the lives of the last homeless group to sleep on

our balcony. It introduced us again to the work of the Dublin Christian Mission which is not so far away. What is God doing in the massive development of office space in Charlemont, or the Irish Life building just across the road? In terms of thinking through this and the connections with people in the church, I would recommend a book by Tim Keller called *Ministries of Mercy*, which I remember has a clear point on seeing what God is doing in the area and considering how we might help or compliment what He is already doing.

D. What is God's aim? → transformed hearts

The Holy Spirit came upon Cornelius, his family and friends in a manner like with the Apostles in the room in Jerusalem (v.15). They must have spoken in tongues (v.17) and, in effect, this moment was a Gentile Pentecost in Caesarea. The goal of God's work is to have people who worship Him, to grow the Church, to save men, women, and children. "*God has granted even the Gentiles repentance unto life*" (v.18). The direction God would have us walk is towards Him; it's turning to look and see Him, consider His character and claim on our lives. It is, therefore, in the direction of repentance and forgiveness of the Holy Spirit and eternal life. What does that look like?

In reference to the biblical counselling model (three trees diagram), I was reminded of this week's idea of heat, sin, and suffering, which in this situation is change, a challenge to our thinking or way of doing something confirmed by the pictures of the Bible and the word of God. Often the response in our hearts is negative, sinful, bad fruit to use the biblical counselling picture. It is the admission of that reality in our hearts that moves us towards repentance unto life, and Jesus graciously forgives and changes our hearts by giving us a new heart, empowered by the Spirit to bear good fruit. That changes the dynamic of how we interact with the heat of change, or the person who causes our suffering, or circumstances of illness.

This is what you see in the great example of the Jerusalem church (v.18). To their credit, they stopped criticising, their objections ceased, and they praised God for the work He had been doing in the lives of the Gentiles. It comes about because they listen and think biblically in pictures and words and turn and walk in the direction of repentance and life.

In conclusion, we see the importance of this ongoing work of the Church, in considering her life and direction of travel, in careful communication:

- thinking biblically in pictures and words
- considering what God is doing and how we see Him working
- with the goal of being led and leading many to "repentance unto life"
- the direction of travel for us is always towards God and life
- In all this, prayer is at the heart of the work, expressing our absolute dependence on God for vision, word, and work.

Seeing this in this passage excited me, because it is a model for working through the change and progress that ARPC needs to embrace in the living with Covid scenario. It also gives us a mandate to helpfully engage with the ongoing reform and progress of God's leading us in every aspect of life, even if tough, which will always involve repentance unto life.

Praise: There Is A Redeemer

Prayers for Others

Announcements

Closing Hymn: All Glory Be To Christ

Benediction

Discussion & Application:

Review the unfolding story in Acts 10:1-11:18. What challenges did both Peter and Cornelius face? How did God help them through these challenges?

Think of a challenge you have faced or a situation that necessitated change. What did these circumstances reveal about the condition of your heart? (Consider your thoughts, words, and actions.)

Consider the idea of 'repentance unto life' or 'repentance that leads to life' (v.18). What is revealed by this passage? How is it central to good, biblical change?