**The Not-Yet Christian**
**Acts 10 :1-34**

When I was a student I think one of my least favourite subjects was biochemistry. And that was probably because the lectures happened on a Saturday morning, when I'd rather have been just about anywhere else. And I'd cycle down to the lecture theatre, and lock my bike up outside this beaten up old hut. And this hut was part workshop, part bike-shed, and part general university dumping ground. It was one of those pre-fab buildings that was stick up after the war, you'd never give a second glance at. Until we got the lecture on the structure of DNA, and the lecturer pointed out that Watson and Crick had discovered the structure of DNA in that dump of a building which I was now using to lock my bike up against. And he told the story of how those two men had wrestled with the structure of DNA until one night, one of them had a dream. And he dreamt of two snakes coiled around one another, and he'd woken up with one of those eureka! moments, as he realised DNA had to be a double helix.

Now, whether that story is true or not, the dreams and visions we hear about in this passage have arguably had a much more profound influence on the history of mankind than even the discovery of DNA. And so far in Acts we've seen the gospel go to the Jewish people, to the Samaritans, to the Ethiopian eunuch and to Saul, a Pharisee – so we've seen it crossing these divides of culture and race.

But now we're going to see it leap over the last and greatest barrier of all – the barrier between Jew and Gentile. Now the magnitude of this event can be lost on you and me, all these years later, but it's demonstrated here in two ways. Firstly, there's the amount of ink Luke, the writer of Acts, expends on it – this is by far the longest account within Acts – which is why we're going to take two weeks to tackle it; but secondly because it takes the direct supernatural intervention of God, to bring it about. But in bringing it about, the Holy Spirit lays the ground for the gospel to go to all the world – which means it lays the ground for the gospel to come to you and me.

But the first thing I want you to see, is that this passage tells us what Christianity isn't.

**What Christianity Isn't – mark 1**
So Luke opens this account by telling us, v1: 'At Caesarea there was a man named Cornelius, a centurion of what was known as the Italian Cohort.' Now the Jewish people hated Caesarea. It had been built by King Herod, and he named it after Caesar, the Roman emperor, even building a temple there dedicated to the worship of Caesar. All within what should have been the Holy Land. And the gentile population there significantly outnumbered the Jewish population. Not only that, but Caesarea was the administrative capital of the Roman government of Judea. So, can you begin to understand why, if you were a Jew, you'd hate this place? It's the nerve centre of the occupying forces.

And living in Caesarea was this man Cornelius, who was almost certainly Italian. And he's a centurion – a military leader, a man of status in this occupying force. And yet despite having all that going against him, Luke says in v22 that this man was 'well spoken of by the whole Jewish nation.' Now how is that the case? He's a gentile, he's a commander of the Roman occupying forces and he's living in

Caesarea, which the Jewish people hated, and yet the Jews, to a man, seem to have respected him. Why?

Well, Luke tells us, v2: he was 'a devout man who feared God with all his household, gave alms generously to the people, and prayed continually to God.' So something about the monotheism of Judaism had attracted Cornelius. He hadn't converted to Judaism, but he was serious and devout, he wasn't your average idol-worshipping pagan Roman. And that religious conviction in his life impacted his life. He had brought his family up to be devout – leading his family as well as he led his men. He gathered other soldiers around him who thought similarly. When he sends his two servants to go and fetch Peter, Luke tells us he sends with them 'a devout soldier from among those who attended him' (v7). He used his financial resources as a Roman officer to make sure the poor around him were cared for. And it wasn't that these religious convictions had impacted his horizontal relationships. Luke tells us he prayed continually – he was a man of prayer. His vertical relationship with God mattered to him.

So this guy was a good man. As a God fearer he would have gone to the synagogue regularly. His family was in order. He's a leader of men who had good men around him. He used his resources to do good in the lives of others. He prayed regularly.

And yet… And yet, he still wasn't a Christian, was he? None of what he was doing was bad – far from it. But he wasn't yet a Christian. He still lacked something. And that tells you something that you've got to grasp if you want to understand the Christian faith: Christianity is not about living a good, upright, moral life, even one that takes religion seriously. It tells you that its possible to come to church, and to pray regularly, and to give your money away generously, and to have a good reputation in your community, even to have real and profound spiritual experiences just as Cornelius had this vision, and still not be a Christian, because you still lack something crucial.

But then we see something else here that Christianity isn't.

**What Christianity Isn't – mark. 2**

In v9 Luke tells us that the apostle Peter, who's staying in the town of Joppa down the coast from Caesarea, 'went up on the housetop about the sixth hour to pray.' Now, why's he gone onto the roof, to pray? Well, these would have been flat roofs, so maybe there was a bit of a breeze up there to cool down in the heat of the day. But I reckon there's something else. He's staying with a guy called Simon – who's a tanner. That means he takes the hide off dead animals and makes leather from them. So the smell downstairs would have been pretty pungent – it would smell worse than a teenager's bedroom. So Peter's gone up top to try and escape it.

But whilst he's up there praying he get's hungry – it's lunch time. Now, when our girls come home from school in the afternoon, they just want some food. 'Mum, dad, where are the biscuits? Why's there no cake? Hannah did you eat all the cake? Mum there's no food in the house'. Now, they're girls. I dread to think what

it must be like with boys. But when you're hungry, you can't think of anything else can you? It intrudes on your thoughts. And Peter's praying but he's hungry, and he can't shake it, so he calls down for lunch. But whilst they're preparing it for him, Luke tells us, v10-11, that 'he fell into a trance, and saw the heavens opened and something like a great sheet descending.'

And in that sheet were all kinds of animals, clean and unclean. Now, if you don't know, according to the Law of Moses there were some animals the people of Israel could eat – those were the clean ones, and some they couldn't– the unclean ones. But this sheet was full of both clean and unclean – birds and animals and reptiles. And then Peter hears a voice saying, v13, "Rise, Peter; kill and eat." Now these unclean animals would have disgusted an orthodox Jew, and so Peter says, 'No way God – I'm not going to do that, I'm a good Jew', v14, "I have never eaten anything that is common or unclean". But when he refused, the voice said again, "What God has made clean, do not call common" (v15). And this happened three times Luke tells us. Three times God saying kill and eat, and three times Peter refusing.

Now, why does it happen three times? Well, ladies you might think it's obvious – he's a man – of course he needed to be told multiple times. But just think about it. Peter ends up saying 'no' to God three times. And remember how many times Peter denied Jesus? And maybe God is saying listen Peter, you've just said 'no' to me three times – but remember how that worked out last time.

But, why this vision? Well, God wants the good news of Jesus to go to this Roman Centurion Cornelius, and he wants Peter to take it. But Peter's a Jew, and there's this huge gulf between Jews and Gentiles. To Peter, to enter a Gentile's home and sit and eat with them would have been as hard to swallow, as repulsive as eating one of these lizards on this sheet. 'I'm not going there Lord.'

You see, God had chosen the people of Israel to be a light to the nations, that all people would be blessed through them. But that special calling had become a kind of religious exclusiveness – that looked down on gentiles as dogs, that was filled with pride and a deep sense of prejudice against others. And so if the gospel was to go to the gentiles it was that deep-seated prejudice that had to be broken down.

And so the 30+mile journey to get Peter from Joppa to Caesarea was nothing in comparison to the journey that had to take place in Peter's heart. And as an example of that, do you remember the story of Jonah? Centuries before Peter, God had called another man, Jonah, to take his message to the gentiles – not of Rome, but of Nineveh – the super-power of his day. And it was to this same port, Joppa, where Peter is now, that Jonah fled to run away from God's call, such was the level of hatred to these gentiles – he'd rather try and escape God than see Gentiles come to repentance and faith.

You see, if Christianity is more than the good, moral upstanding life of a good man like Cornelius, it is also totally different from the kind of 'holier than thou, I'm better than you, we're a class apart' attitude that passes for much of religion.

And just as Peter would have been tempted to look down on gentiles as being less than him, as being unclean, and untouchable, so religion can foster this kind of 'I can keep you at arms length, I'm morally superior to you, attitude.' But that is a million miles from true Christianity.

And so the Holy Spirit tells Peter here in Joppa to stop making these kind of clean/unclean, worthy/unworthy distinctions. And whilst he's puzzling over what on earth this dream means – eating unclean animals, it all falls into place, when some unclean people, some gentiles, come knocking at the door asking for him. And this time, God's man goes.

So, if Christianity is not the good moral life of a Cornelius, and if it's not exclusive, holier than thou religion, what is it?

**The Real Thing**

Now, you and I are pretty far removed in time and distance from this world that Cornelius and Peter inhabited. And unless you're living among strict orthodox Jews, you're going to have a hard time feeling this kind of ritually clean/unclean divide these men were facing. Because you and I don't think of ourselves as that kind of an outsider.

And yet these clean/unclean food laws were really designed to tell us about a much deeper underlying problem than eating the wrong kind of food. You see, when Jesus was challenged over his failure to observe the rules of the Pharisees that they had built up around these food laws, he said, 'It is not what goes into the mouth that defiles a person, but what comes out of the mouth' (Matt 15:11). Because what comes out of the mouth comes from the heart, and that's what defiles a person. In other words, it's not the food that's the problem, it's us, it's our hearts, and it's from our hearts that come anger and jealousy and criticism, and pride and lust and whatever else we all struggle with. And so there's a sense in which we are all unclean, in a much more profound way than just some sort of ritual impurity.

And maybe some of you know what that feels like. It's not that you're a social outsider, but you look at your past, or even your present failure and you feel unworthy. There's this shadow on your past, or there's this stuff you're struggling with now, and you feel undeserving, you feel like this cuts you off from or alienates you from God's love for you. Which of course it does.

But you see, in some ways that's exactly where Christianity begins. Because for all Cornelius's goodness – he knows he still lacks something, which is why he was so eager to hear from Peter. And in our own hearts our journey to seeing the inner issue of our hearts dealt with, begins as we realise we have a problem; that trying to be good is not enough, that a kind of religious 'I'm better than you' mentality, is not it. It begins with this realisation, 'I'm the one with the problem. It's my heart that's the issue.'

But if that's the problem, where's the solution? Well, look what happens when Peter enters Cornelius' home. Cornelius falls at Peter's feet and, v25, 'worshipped

him.' Having had an angel tell him to go and get this man, Cornelius thinks Peter must be someone really important, some kind of semi-divine heavenly messenger. And Peter the former fisherman, all embarrassed says, "Stand up; I too am a man" (v26). I'm a man, I'm just a man. And that's where Christianity parts company with all other religions. You see, Peter knew that he was not the answer to what Cornelius was searching for. Other religions will tell you, here are our leader's teachings. This man is the one you need to follow, he's the one whose example and words you need to emulate. Apply yourself to this, do the good things he tells you to do and you will save yourself.

As the theologian Michael Horton has said, 'The heart of most religions is good advice, good techniques, good programs, good ideas, and good support systems… but the heart of Christianity is good news. It comes not as a task for us to fulfil… but as a report that someone else has *already* fulfilled and achieved *everything* for us.'

And Peter walks in and picks Cornelius up and says, "I'm just a man" but let me tell you about someone else. And that's what distinguishes real Christianity from every other religion. Because the Gospel is not – this is what you must do to save yourself and make yourself clean, obey the instructions of this religious teacher, it is, this is what God has done for you, to save you and make you clean. And that is why Peter tells Cornelius in v28, "God has shown me that I should not call any person common or unclean." The penny had dropped for Peter – Jesus had done it, he was the only perfectly clean one, the only one unstained and untainted by sin. And because of what Jesus has done for us no-one need be excluded, no-one need fall outside the scope of God's grace, regardless of their past or their present, or their ethnic background, because all who are unclean can be made clean in him.

And so Christianity is not about morality, or about us trying to make ourselves right by being more devout, or giving alms, or praying, or even coming to church. In theological speak, it's about justification by faith – about being justified, declared not-guilty, declared clean and acceptable and loved by God, not because of anything we have done, but because of faith, because of trusting in what Jesus has done.

And because on the cross Jesus took upon himself all our sin and all our uncleanness, now the apostle Paul can say that for those who trust in him, there is 'No condemnation' (Rom 8:1) – there is no finger pointing, that you don't make the grade, that you have not done enough, rather there are the wide open arms of our heavenly father. Because of Jesus, in the words of the Psalmist, 'as far as the east is from the west, so far does he remove our transgressions from us' (Ps 103:12) In the words of Isaiah the prophet, 'though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow' (Is 1:18). Washed clean.

And that's what it means to be a Christian – to believe the gospel, to trust in the good news of what Jesus has done for you. And when you do that, God works this miracle in your heart – in the very centre of where the problem is. And the way Jesus described it was that it was like being born again, it's like your life starting

over, as you realise with joy – it's not what I do, it's not all my efforts and never feeling I can do enough, or the pride of thinking I've done enough, so I'm better than others – but it's what you have done for me Jesus.

And so at one and the same time the good news of Christianity is both deeply humbling and wonderfully uplifting. It is deeply humbling because you realise just how bad you are. But it is also wonderfully uplifting, as it tells you just how loved and accepted and wanted in Christ you are.

So that is what Christianity isn't and what it is. As we close, just briefly, what does all this mean for you?

**Responding to Grace**

Well, to start with, there's a funny thing that's happening in this story. The angel appears to Cornelius and says to him, v4, "Your prayers and your alms have ascended as a memorial before God." And those words – ascended and memorial are really the language of sacrifice – it's as if God is seeing Cornelius' efforts to draw near to God, and God is responding to that by saying, ok, let me tell you more about myself – let me give you more light. You see, God does not hide himself from those who want to find him. In fact, in the words of one writer in the New Testament, he rewards those who earnestly seek him. And maybe you know you're not yet a Christian – not in the real sense of that word as I've used it today, but you want to be. You want to know the freedom of your sins forgiven and your conscience cleansed, you want to know this change in your heart that Jesus says is like being born again. Well, draw near to God and he will draw near to you. Come near to him in prayer, confess and repent of your sin and tell him you put your faith in him and not yourself. And if you'd like to talk to someone or pray with someone, don't go without doing that.

But for those of us who are already Christians, the danger is that we retreat into our Christian ghettos, and almost unwittingly we put up these clean/unclean divides. But the gospel calls us and the Holy Spirit tells us to be like Peter who went, not like Jonah who ran. So let's repent of any pride that says I am better than this person or that group, and let's be those who reach out to those around us in love and humility with this gospel of grace, that plenty more Corneliuses might find what Peter says in v34 to be true, "that God shows no partiality." His grace is for everyone. This week, let's be those who take that grace to the world, in word and in deed and in acts of generosity.