

At some point in the early 1970s, when I was about 11 or so, we were at a family gathering, and I think it was my great-aunt who was telling the story of having been to see a doctor. My mind is hazy as to whether this was the GP or in hospital. I do remember that the appointment had gone well, treatment successful and she obviously felt that the problem was resolved.

"He was an Indian doctor", she said, and added with a little note of surprise in her voice, "but he was very good."

Although it was the early 70s and Bernard Manning was still on mainstream TV, I remember being slightly bothered by this. This man was a qualified doctor, working for the NHS, so of course he should be competent. However, her story suggested that it had been surprising to her that an Indian doctor should be so capable.

With some prejudices seeming to be more openly expressed again in recent days, I have thought back to that moment, and I realise that although it made me wince at the time (let alone now!) under the surface was perhaps a moment of revelation. My great-aunt was delighted to discover that medical competence was not reserved to one nationality or ethnicity, and if she had carried any prejudice before, it had been challenged. It was one of those moments when someone realised that "they" are just like "us".

That all came back to me reading the story of Peter visiting the house of Cornelius in Acts chapter 10. We had an earlier section of this story at midweek communion on Thursday, and we have the conclusion here today.

Cornelius is a Roman centurion – an officer of the occupying army. According to Acts he was charitable, a God-fearer and seemingly carried some respect. However, the Jewish community in which he lived would have had many issues with him. Romans worshipped various gods and even held the emperor in a kind of divine respect. For Jews who steadfastly worshipped one God, that would be difficult and for some even blasphemous. The Romans didn't follow the Jewish food laws, which I am sure devout Jews found repulsive. They also didn't keep the Sabbath, which would have been offensive (although there is evidence even in the gospels that the Romans accommodated the Sabbath to some extent. For example, the gospels report that the crucifixion has to end before the Sabbath begins.)

So, it's no surprise that when God calls Peter to go round to Cornelius' house, one of the first things Peter says when he turns up is:

*"You are well aware that it is against our law for a Jew to associate with or visit a Gentile. But God has shown me that I should not call anyone impure or unclean."* (Acts 10:28)

The personal, communal and psychological barrier that needed to be crossed to go in the house was substantial. Remarkably, some other believers from Joppa went with Peter. Cornelius meanwhile had been expecting Peter and asks to hear what God wishes to tell him.

In that short episode we heard today from the end of this story, I think we have a moment a bit like my great aunt experienced. It was moment of realisation that "they" are like "us".

And the evidence was the Holy Spirit. Let's take it step by step.

Peter tells the story of Jesus to the gathered group in the house. He outlines who Jesus is and what he did:

*“God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and power, and how he went around doing good and healing all who were under the power of the devil, because God was with him.*

*We are witnesses of everything he did in the country of the Jews and in Jerusalem. They killed him by hanging him on a cross, but God raised him from the dead on the third day and caused him to be seen. He was not seen by all the people, but by witnesses whom God had already chosen—by us who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead.” (Acts 10:38-41)*

First, notice that telling the story of Jesus is what facilitated the Holy Spirit to come into the lives of those Gentile Romans who were gathered in the house. I have been to meetings on the Holy Spirit, and sometimes speakers seem to suggest that there is a ‘technique’ to summon the Holy Spirit. But the Spirit isn’t a pet that needs coaxing, or some kind of ghost that needs a séance; He goes where He wills. However, telling the story of Jesus facilitates Him entering a person’s life because encountering Jesus helps us understand the Spirit, and also the Spirit helps us to know Jesus.

Second: The coming of the Spirit had an impact. In this case, Acts records speaking in tongues and praising God as the symptoms. But all kinds of other evidence might have been noted – courage to speak, generosity of spirit, compassion, reconciliation, a deeper hunger to learn more about Jesus from the Scriptures, a sense of purpose and direction. We have lists of gifts of the Spirit, but they don’t claim to be exhaustive. What is testified is that the Holy Spirit always has an impact, an effect. There are symptoms.

Third - and this goes back to my original story, the Holy Spirit is poured out on everyone equally. Ironically, Peter had already preached on the words on the prophet Joel who expected the Spirit to be given to everyone (Acts 2:17). But here Peter - along with the other followers of Jesus who were devout Jews – see God showing no discrimination. The Spirit comes on the Gentiles just as He had come on the Jewish disciples. And so they are baptised. It is a moment of revelation that “they” are just like “us”, and God shows no partiality.

Before I trained for the ministry I worked in a church in Cambridge for a couple of years and during that time I met David Armstrong. He was a Presbyterian minister in Northern Ireland during the height of the troubles and the end of the 70s and early 80s. He had done pioneering work building a relationship with the Roman Catholic church across the road from his. This led to abuse, death threats and more. Eventually it took a toll on his health and family, and so he came to England and in due course became a C of E priest.

David had had the same prejudices about Catholics as many of his fellow Protestants until he found himself in a context where Roman Catholics and Protestants were gathered at Belfast Anglican cathedral. The speaker talked about the Holy Spirit, and David realised as the meeting continued that around him from both sides of the terrible divide in Northern Ireland were people who had experienced the Holy Spirit. It was a moment just like in Cornelius’ house. A moment of revelation that “they” are just like “us”, and God shows no partiality.

So, my prayer as I anticipate Pentecost is that the Holy Spirit would challenge any prejudices I may have; that I may seek to look beyond not just the usual identifiers of gender, ethnicity, nationality, sexual orientation and so on, but beyond any divisions where I might see some people as “them” and others as “us” in that divisive sense. I might not think I would rule anyone out of God’s reach, but do I?

As we approach Pentecost let’s pray that God would help us to see all people as he sees them. We may find ourselves pleasantly surprised to find that “they” are actually just like “us” and God shows no partiality.