

ACTS 10 – 11:18 SERMON

Hattie McDaniel was an American actress, singer-songwriter, and comedian. She won the Academy Award for Best supporting actress for her role as “Mammy” in ‘Gone with the Wind’ (1939), becoming the first African American to win an Oscar. However, when it came to the premiere of the film she was not permitted to attend the premiere of *Gone with the Wind* with Georgia being racially segregated, and at the Oscars ceremony at the Ambassador Hotel in Los Angeles she was required to sit at a segregated table at the far wall of the room; the hotel had a no-blacks policy, but allowed McDaniel in as a special favour. McDaniel’s final wish to be buried in Hollywood Cemetery was denied because the graveyard was restricted to whites only. It’s easy to forget that only a few years ago blacks were not allowed to eat in the same buildings as whites; restaurants would actually have signs that read, ‘Whites Only’; schools were segregated. Intentional separation of whites and blacks. Same in South Africa; same in Australia.

Acts chapter 8 gave us a glimpse into the racial segregation and superiority felt by the Jews over Samaritans and foreigners. Today in chap.10 & 11 we come to one of the critical sections of Acts. What happens in our story today is a real gamechanger in the story of the gospel going out to every part of the world.

To understand the significance of this story today we need to recognize/understand what Jews believed. Those who are doing the Old Testament course on Saturday - we had one yesterday – will know that God had chosen Abraham and made some huge promises to him – his descendants would be blessed and they would be a blessing to all other nations. Now again I want you to put yourselves in the shoes of a Jew at this time; most believed that Yahweh, their God was just for the Jews.

You were trained from the start to know there were only **two kinds of people in the world**. You, and the **gentiles**. You **Jews**, and **everyone else**. And in a way rightly so: because right from the beginning, you in a unique way **were the people of God**.

And nobody else was invited.

And right through the Old Testament there were **laws** designed to remind you that **you Israelites were very special**. That you were **distinct**. That you, if you did all the sacrifices right, if you were careful **what you touched** and **whose house you went in...** that **you were the clean** and everyone else was **unclean**.

And you'd get that drilled into you every waking moment. And there were certain **foods** that everyone else ate that you just **wouldn't eat** because that was **unclean food**. And **you were clean** in a dirty, dirty world full of dirty, dirty people who were **different to you**.

So let's begin our story. There are 7 parts.

Part One – we're introduced to Cornelius. He's a Roman centurion, he's got 100 men under his command. And he's a good guy. He gives to the poor, he believes in the Jewish God, he prays to God, we read later in v.22 that he's respected by all the Jews. That's saying something because most Jews hated the Romans for taking over their country.

Anyway, he has a vision. Angel of God says, v.4, "God's seen all your good deeds and your love for him. Go and get Peter. He's staying in Joppa, 50 miles away, at Simon the Tanner's house.

So.,v.8, he sends three men to Joppa to get Peter. End Part one.

Part two – Next day, Pete's about to have lunch and while he's waiting for the food to be prepared he goes up on the roof to pray. He, too, gets something from God. But it's different – a big picnic blanket comes down from the sky. In it are lots of animals, reptiles, birds, all kinds of **four footed animals**.

And all of them, it seems, are the kind that **Israelites aren't meant to eat**. They're all from the **unclean list** in the book of **Leviticus**.

A voice says to him, verse 13, "**Get up Peter - kill and eat.**"

But Peter is horrified. I can't eat those animals. That would be **breaking all the Jewish rules**. And he says in verse 14,

Surely not Lord. I have **never eaten anything impure or unclean**. My lips are **clean**. Nothing **unclean** has **ever gone into me**.

I'm a **good Jewish boy**. How can you tell me to **do that**? And the voice speaks to him a second time. "Do not call **anything impure... that God has made clean.**"

Do you get that? "**Do not call anything impure that God has made clean.**"

Peter doesn't get it yet. Verse 16 says the whole thing happens **three times**. And then the sheet's taken back into heaven.

So Part 3: Now if you're Peter, this vision has really rocked your boat - **what do you make of that?** He's still **thinking about it** when a voice calls out from the **gate**. "Is **Simon Peter here?**" Now Simon Peter you see is **still daydreaming about the vision**. Don't call **anything unclean... that I have made clean**. It's interesting how Luke records that Peter twice, in v.17 and 19 – While he's still wondering about....; while he's still thinking about..." While these **unclean gentiles** are standing at the gate, the **spirit** nudges him again. Verse 19.

Simon, three men are looking for you. **get up and go downstairs. Do not hesitate to go with them for I have sent them.**

So he goes down. He says, "**why have you come?**"

They say, verse 22, "We've come from Cornelius the centurion. He is a righteous and God fearing man, who is **respected by all the Jewish people.**"

And they say, "**a holy angel... told him to have you come to his house so that he could hear what you have to say.**"

At which point Peter invites the men into **his house to be his guests**.

Now this might not seem a very big thing to you reading this, but do you see what Peter has just done – he's invited these three guys **INTO HIS HOUSE.. INTO HIS HOUSE!**

In verse 23, Peter inviting these gentiles into **his house... that right there...** is the **breakthrough**. That right there is Peter saying, **I get it. I get it** that the old **clean-unclean boundary rules** no longer apply. The old rules of the Jews no longer apply. **I now get it** that the **fellowship of the kingdom of Jesus** is far **wider and broader and deeper** than I ever realised. I get it what Jesus said about clean and unclean in Mark 7 – it now makes sense.

I get it that I'm going to **share my house** and **share a table** and **share my food** with the kind of people who **I once in my mind thought were unclean**, and **excluded**. Now they're my guests.

And that takes us into Part 4, v.27 - Here Peter sums up very clearly when he's arrived now at Caesarea at **the house of Italian Cornelius**. And he **goes in** without even a **second thought**. There's a **group there**. Cornelius has invited all his friends and relatives. And Peter says this, verse 28... **You are very well aware** that it is **against our law** for a **Jew** to associate with a **gentile... or visit him**.

Right now, he says, I'm **breaking our law**. But God has shown me that I should not call **any man impure or unclean**. So when I was sent for I came without raising **any objections**.

You get that? God has shown me I should not call **any man impure or unclean**. I shouldn't rule **anyone out**. I shouldn't put up **any boundary** between **me and anyone** on the basis of their **ethnic origins**. Or even their **State of Origin** if it's **footy season**. That stuff just **doesn't matter**.

So Part 5 – from v.34 – God is doing a work in Cornelius; but God is also doing a work in Peter isn't he – Pete's got some relearning to do. God is orchestrating things here. You might be stuck in your house but God can bring people to your door wanting to know the good news about Jesus.

We need to spend a few minutes on what Peter says next. Because it's the **essence of the gospel**. And you might be thinking with a guy like Cornelius who's a **God fearing gentile who does lots of good deeds** that he doesn't **need anything else to be saved**. But you couldn't be further from the truth. It's interesting isn't it? last week we

had **Saul the religious Jew** who needed to **submit to king Jesus**. And now we've got **Cornelius the good living gentile**. He needs to submit to King Jesus as well.

Verse 34, Peter starts talking. "I now realise **how true it is** that God does not show favouritism." At last **I get it**, says Peter. **Jesus** is not just for us **Jews**. He says God's going to accept people from **every nation** who **fear him** and do what is right. People like Cornelius who are ready to **repent** and turn to Jesus. And you'll see that's exactly what Peter calls on them to do.

Verse 36, this is the message **God sent to the people of Israel**, telling the good news of peace through Jesus Christ, **who is Lord of all**.

I get it! **Lord of all**. Not just of **Israel**. And he tells them how Jesus went around healing through **Judea**, how he defeated **the power of the devil**. How they killed him; how God raised him back to life. And how he's been appointed by God as the **one who's going to judge the living and the dead**.

And verse 43; the punch line. All the prophets testify about him, that **everyone who believes in him...** receives **forgiveness of sins** through his name.

That's **everyone** with a **capital E**. Doesn't matter **where you've come from**. What nationality, what denomination, what anything. Whether you used to be a Jew or a Hindu or a prostitute, whether you used to be a drug addict or a paedophile, a **good living Roman centurion...** What you **used to be** isn't the point. When you come to the point of **believing in Jesus**, it doesn't matter where you've come from. You've come to the right place. And you're welcome. And you receive the one thing that matters most of all: the forgiveness of your sins so that **your wrongs** are no longer listed on **your account...** they're cancelled.

Peter says, **everyone** who believes, who puts their trust in this Jesus who lived and died and rose and sits in judgement; **everyone who does that** - receives forgiveness of sins. In his name. On his account. And **God calls you clean**.

Remember those words again? With the picnic rug full of **unclean food**? God says **don't you** call anything **impure...** that **I have called clean**.

And now he's calling **Cornelius the gentile clean**. And his whole household with him **clean**. He calls **you and me clean**. And the person beside you and behind you. No matter what you've been through that's made you feel otherwise, if you've believed on Jesus, **forgiven. clean**. And if you're clean and if they're clean, **what's to divide over?** There's no one who is better – there's just clean and unclean. Because of what Jesus did on the cross.

And so, part 6 – v.44 - Holy Spirit comes on Cornelius and all those who heard the message. And so as Cornelius and his household **believe**; it's like the **day of Pentecost all over again the Spirit that came on the first Jewish believers so visibly... now comes on them**. Right in front of Peter's eyes. Unmistakeable. I love v.45 – “The circumcised believers who had come with Peter were astonished that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out **EVEN** on the Gentiles.”

And so Peter says to his Jewish friends who came with him, **come on**, we'll baptise them **with water now** as a **sign they're part of the church**. Because they've received the **holy spirit** just like **we did**.

Which they do.

At which point the story should be over, with more celebration and fireworks. **Especially for people like us**, because if you haven't twigged yet, if it wasn't for Peter's vision and the visit to Cornelius, if Jesus hadn't **made this stuff clear to him**, Gentiles like **you and me** wouldn't **be here this morning**.

But there's another twist in the story. Because when Peter gets back to Jerusalem, he's in trouble. You can see it at the start of chapter 11.

Arthur's going to read this, so listen carefully.

Peter's in trouble with the **other apostles**. He's in trouble with the **brothers in Judea**. Look what happens.

The apostles and the brothers throughout Judea heard that the **gentiles also had received the word of God**. So when Peter went up to Jerusalem, the circumcised believers [the Jewish ones] **criticised him**. "You went **into the house of uncircumcised men**, these dirty gentiles; and ate with them.

How could you? See, there's a great picture of the way even your average **Jewish Christian** is thinking.

And so Peter takes them through the story; one step at a time; the vision with the unclean animals; the voice from heaven; Cornelius, and his vision. And finally, verse 16, how the Holy Spirit came on them... just like he came on **the Jewish believers** at the beginning. No difference.

So he says if God gave them the same gift as he gave us, who believed in the Lord Jesus, who was I to think that I could oppose God?

And so when they hear this, they've got **no further objections**, verse 18; and they say, **wow**. "God has granted **even the gentiles...** repentance that leads to life."

One little thing that I think is worth mentioning. The narrative does not record a repentance from idolatry or from an immoral life on the part of Cornelius and his household. Yet even for those described as devout and God-fearing, turning to Christ involved a radical reorientation of allegiance and devotion, which is what is meant in this case by 'repentance that leads to life'. Not simply repentance of particular sins, but it's a turning to Jesus – he is now my commanding officer. I'm taking orders from him.

What is Luke wanting to show us in his account? Remember he's writing to a Greek friend, almost certainly a Gentile. This section is critical. Am I as a Gentile going to be welcome into Jesus' kingdom? My Jewish friends have always told me that I have to become a Jew first in order to follow God. What difference does Jesus' death and resurrection make to all that?

The big message really is EVERYONE and ANYONE can come into the Kingdom. It's not just for Jews.

A paedophile, a sex offender, a gangster, a murderer – whatever your definition of a really bad person – God can save them; they can come into God's family when they believe and repent.

It's great as we look at our church that we have people from Kenya, Philippines, Samoa; **brothers and sisters from other parts of the world.**

Are you **welcoming them**? How do we view our brothers and sisters?

First and foremost, we've got to be reminded, there's **no place for racism**, not **any hint of it**, in a **church ruled by Jesus Christ**. And yet it can easily enough creep in, always with the presupposition that **our own way is the right way** and **other ways are odd**.

In the end, we want to be a church that **celebrates diversity** in all kinds of ways.

And I reckon even if we're not **racist** you just have to scratch the surface with most of us and you'll find maybe a kind of **disinterest** in people who **aren't your kind of people**. It's easier to **stand back and keep a distance**. Are we going to go out to others?

Put aside your fears. Look at others as Jesus looks at them.

For us who are here this morning in the church find someone you haven't talked with for a long time or at all. Invite them to sit at an appropriate distance at morning tea. But for those on Zoom, in fact all of us, during the week could you ring someone you haven't talked with for a while or ever. See how they're going. Encourage them, pray with them.

We want this church to be a place where everyone is accepted because Jesus has accepted me. Don't wait for others to come to you, you go to others. Even at this Covid time our homes can be places of welcome with appropriate social distancing and care.

Keep in mind it was a tough lesson for Peter. But that's why **you're here in the first place**.

So don't go calling anyone **impure... that God has made clean**.