

Sunday 12 November 2023 9.00 am and 10.30 am

OUR GOD MAY BE TOO SMALL

Sermon preached by The Revd Dr Tony Martin delivered at Cromwell
Presbyterian Church



READING:

Acts 10:1-48

Cornelius Calls for Peter

1 At Caesarea there was a man named Cornelius, a centurion in what was known as the Italian Regiment. 2 He and all his family were devout and God-fearing; he gave generously to those in need and prayed to God regularly. 3 One day at about three in the afternoon he had a vision. He distinctly saw an angel of God, who came to him and said, “Cornelius!”

4 Cornelius stared at him in fear. “What is it, Lord?” he asked.

The angel answered, “Your prayers and gifts to the poor have come up as a memorial offering before God. 5 Now send men to Joppa to bring back a man named Simon who is

called Peter. 6 He is staying with Simon the tanner, whose house is by the sea.”

7 When the angel who spoke to him had gone, Cornelius called two of his servants and a devout soldier who was one of his attendants. 8 He told them everything that had happened and sent them to Joppa.

Peter's Vision

9 About noon the following day as they were on their journey and approaching the city, Peter went up on the roof to pray. 10 He became hungry and wanted something to eat, and while the meal was being prepared, he fell into a trance. 11 He saw heaven opened and something like a large sheet being let down to earth by its four corners. 12 It contained all kinds of four-footed animals, as well as reptiles and birds. 13 Then a voice told him, “Get up, Peter. Kill and eat.”

14 “Surely not, Lord!” Peter replied. “I have never eaten anything impure or unclean.”

15 The voice spoke to him a second time, “Do not call anything impure that God has made clean.”

16 This happened three times, and immediately the sheet was taken back to heaven.

17 While Peter was wondering about the meaning of the vision, the men sent by Cornelius found out where Simon’s house was and stopped at the gate. 18 They called out, asking if Simon who was known as Peter was staying there.

19 While Peter was still thinking about the vision, the Spirit said to him, “Simon, three men are looking for you. 20 So get up and go downstairs. Do not hesitate to go with them, for I have sent them.”

21 Peter went down and said to the men, “I’m the one you’re looking for. Why have you come?”

22 The men replied, “We have come from Cornelius the centurion. He is a righteous and God-fearing man, who is respected by all the Jewish people. A holy angel told him to ask you to come to his house so that he could hear what you have to say.” 23 Then Peter invited the men into the house to be his guests.

Peter at Cornelius’s House

The next day Peter started out with them, and some of the believers from Joppa went along. 24 The following day he arrived in Caesarea. Cornelius was expecting them and had called together his relatives and close friends. 25 As Peter entered the house, Cornelius met him and fell at his feet in reverence. 26 But Peter

made him get up. “Stand up,” he said, “I am only a man myself.”

27 While talking with him, Peter went inside and found a large gathering of people. 28 He said to them: “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. 29 So when I was sent for, I came without raising any objection. May I ask why you sent for me?”

30 Cornelius answered: “Three days ago I was in my house praying at this hour, at three in the afternoon. Suddenly a man in shining clothes stood before me 31 and said, ‘Cornelius, God has heard your prayer and remembered your gifts to the poor. 32 Send to Joppa for Simon who is called Peter. He is a guest in the home of Simon the tanner, who lives by the sea.’ 33 So I sent for you immediately, and it was good of you to come. Now we are all here in the presence of God to

listen to everything the Lord has commanded you to tell us.”

34 Then Peter began to speak: “I now realize how true it is that God does not show favoritism 35 but accepts from every nation the one who fears him and does what is right. 36 You know the message God sent to the people of Israel, announcing the good news of peace through Jesus Christ, who is Lord of all. 37 You know what has happened throughout the province of Judea, beginning in Galilee after the baptism that John preached— 38 how 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.

39 “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, 40 but God raised him from the dead on the third day and caused him to be seen. 41 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. 42 He commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he is the one whom God appointed as judge of the living and the dead. 43 All the prophets testify about him that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name.”

44 While Peter was still speaking these words, the Holy Spirit came on all who heard the message. 45 The circumcised believers who had come with Peter were astonished that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on Gentiles. 46 For they heard them speaking in tongues and praising God.

Then Peter said, 47 “Surely no one can stand in the way of their being baptized with water. They have received the Holy Spirit just as we have.” 48 So he ordered that they be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ. Then they asked Peter to stay with them for a few days.

SENTENCE FOR THE DAY

Acts: 10:42 He commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he is the one whom God appointed as judge of the living and the dead.

INTRODUCTION

I enjoy reading the book of the Acts of the Apostles, which tell of the life and growth of the early church.

I am reminding myself that the early church went into a significant time of persecution immediately after Jesus' resurrection appearances. Are you surprised by that?

One might think that ... once Jesus appeared raised from the grave ... that all the problems of the church would be over ... a bit like winning the lottery ... a religious Powerball ... **“hey, I told you we were right ... come join us ... we are**

on the road to glory ... we are in the winning team.”

No, it didn't work that way at all. In fact, a whole lot of people – especially religious people - wanted to eliminate the church completely.

Now you may recall that the conversion of Saul in Acts chapter 9 ... and remember his back-story was ... that he was on a mission to wipe out the infant church ... called the Way.

And believers only acquired the name Christian ... in Antioch ... after the persecution became so widespread ... that believers scattered from Jerusalem to Cyprus, Cyrene and Antioch, which is in modern day Turkey.

The passage we read today in Acts 10 ... is fascinating ... because it shows how the early Christians understanding of God was too small ...

You see God's mission was not only to the Jews in Jerusalem ... but to the Gentile ... or non-Jews ... in the wider world.

That was a revolutionary change ... which caught many by surprise.

I also love this narrative ... because it is about a soldier ... Cornelius ... who was godly, caring, and professional ... but he also belonged to the military ... to the Italian Regiment of the Roman Army.

So, how did the church arrive at a turning point ... where insiders ... were willing to include outsiders?

Well, from the beginning in Jerusalem ... the good news was taken to Samaria, then, with the conversion of the Ethiopian, to the very **“ends of the earth”** (1:8).

And what is more ... as we have noted ... Saul, a vile persecutor of the early church ... became Paul ... God's chosen instrument.

So, what was going on here? Where will the gospel go next?

OK, a marvellously constructed seven-act drama recounts the events.¹

SCENE ONE (10:1–8) ENTER CORNELIUS: A GENTILE ROMAN ARMY OFFICER.

Luke says he was **“a devout man who feared God ..., gave alms ..., and prayed constantly to God”** (10:2).

¹ HAENCHEN, ERNST. *The Acts of the Apostles*, translated from the 14th German edition (1965) by Bernard Noble and Gerald Shinn. Translation updated and revised by R. McL. Wilson (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1971).¹

Do note ... that he made his living in the military ... serving in an occupying force ... in someone else's country.

Cornelius also reminds us of the pious centurion in Luke 7:2–10 ... who received Jesus' compassion.

Soldiers, as we can see, are not beyond the love of God ... even if sometimes they live in a far country ... and do not seem to be ... like us at all!

So, he is a gentile yes, and a Roman soldier yes, and he was also devout.

But he was an outsider ... and one who was ... at least on the fringe ... of the growing Christian community.

We note that he is also willing to be instructed ... and be guided.

And, interestingly, Cornelius' movement toward faith ... was not entirely a matter of his choice alone ... or his autonomous decision.

You see ... a vision is important here. Cornelius ... like Saul ... is almost a passive actor ... in a drama ... being directed at every turn ... by someone greater than himself ... by the divine.

SCENE TWO (10:9–16): YES, CORNELIUS HAD A STRANGE VISION ... AND NOW IT IS PETER'S TURN TO HAVE A VISION, WHICH HE FOUND QUITE CONFUSING.

We read that when Peter is praying at noon ... on the flat roof ... of a home ... a large sheet is lowered containing several animals.

Peter is told to slaughter and to eat. The voice says, in effect, "Come on, then! Eat!"

Three times the voice commands ... but Peter showed his loyalty to the sacred dietary laws of his Jewish religion ... and refuses.

You see, it was considered that only ... adherence to those laws ... would prevent assimilation ... and therefore, destruction ... of the Jewish identity.

The Jewish identity ... their understanding of what it meant to be faithful ... was encapsulated in a set of defining religious practices.

And, no doubt, they were experiencing incredible pressure ... to leave their faith ... to compromise their religious behaviour ... and become one of the crowd ... a good citizen of the Empire.

A little pork here, a pinch of incense to Caesar there ... and before you know it ... it will not be long ... before the identity of the faith community ... will disappear.

I feel we must understand here ... the perspective from the Jewish point of view. The dietary laws were not a mere matter of ... etiquette ... or of peculiar culinary habits.

They were seen as a matter of identity ... and therefore survival for the Jews.

And yet, can it be ... that Peter is told in a vision that ... these laws ... are to be ignored?

No wonder Peter ... is left baffled by the vision ... when he is told ... to take and to eat ... the forbidden food.

SCENE THREE (10:17–23A): CORNELIUS' MESSENGERS ARRIVE AT JOPPA SEEKING PETER.

Once more ... Luke, the author of the Book of Acts ... tells and retells ... the account of the angel's visit to Cornelius ... for there must be no forgetting ... that the script for this drama ... is being choreographed by God (cf 10:30 and 11:13).

The Lord is taking the initiative here.

You see, we read that Peter does not know ... where he is going, or why.

Peter must have been baffled ... but he is still willing to be led.

And this sounds very similar to Mary, don't you think ... who was told at the annunciation ... she was to be the mother of Jesus, and she replied ... **"I am the handmaid of the Lord."**

One of the challenges and mysteries of being a follower of Christ, I believe, ... is disciples ... are those ... who at times say, **“Lord, I do not know where you are leading me, but here I am.”**

I have a wall plaque at home with the following words:

And I said to the man who stood at the gate of the year: "Give me a light that I may tread safely into the unknown".

And he replied: "Go out into the darkness and put your hand into the Hand of God. That shall be to you better than light and safer than a known way".

So, I went forth, and finding the Hand of God, trod gladly into the night. And He led me towards the hills and the breaking of day in the lone East.²

² "The Gate of the Year" is the popular name given to a poem by Minnie Louise Haskins. The title given to it by the author was "God Knows". She studied and then taught at the London School of Economics in the first half of the twentieth century.

The poem, written in 1908 and privately published in 1912, was part of a collection titled The Desert. It caught the public attention and the popular imagination when King George VI quoted it in his 1939 Christmas broadcast to the British Empire. The poem may have been brought to his attention by his wife, Queen Elizabeth (the Queen Consort).

The book *The Servant Queen and the King She Serves* published for Queen Elizabeth II's 90th birthday, its foreword being by that monarch, says that it was the young Princess Elizabeth herself, aged 13, who handed the poem to her father.

**SCENE FOUR (10:23B–33) IS AT
CORNELIUS' HOME, WITH FAMILY AND
FRIENDS, AND IT SETS THE SCENE
WHERE PETER GAVE AN EPOCH MAKING
SPEECH**

Now, both Cornelius and Peter needed changing if God's mission was to go forward.

What the gathering at home ... first sees ... is the mighty Cornelius at the feet of Peter ... worshipping him. Ouch. Peter graciously instructs Cornelius' misguided devotion, **“Stand up; I too am a man” (10:26).**

The poem was widely acclaimed as inspirational, reaching its first mass audience in the early days of the Second World War. Its words remained a source of comfort to the Queen Mother for the rest of her life, and she had its words engraved on stone plaques and fixed to the gates of the King George VI Memorial Chapel at Windsor Castle, where the King was interred. The Queen Mother was also buried there in 2002, and the words of "The Gate of the Year" were included in a reflection in her funeral's order of service.

The poem was included in the closing moments of the 1940 Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer/Frank Borzage film *The Mortal Storm*, starring Margaret Sullavan, James Stewart and Robert Young.

Through the dialogue of Peter and Cornelius ... we read that the old divisions were broken down ... as Jew and gentile talk amiably ... within the home ... that had formerly been ... off limits ... to Peter.

Placed here ... and treated in this way ... the scene serves as a warm ... and touching example ... of the joyful possibilities ... when God brings life, growth, and change ... to our community of faith.

SCENE FIVE (10:34–43): RECORDS ONE OF THE MOST IMPORTANT SERMONS IN THE BIBLE.

The sermon which opens with a stunning confession by Peter: **“I now know that God shows no partiality.”**

And the speech ... then follows the outline to which is typical in the Book of Acts ...

proclamation, scriptural proof, and summons to repentance.

In essence ... God looks beyond the superficial ...

God does not play favorites ... and God shows no partiality. God does not belong to a nation ... or indeed today, we would say, a denomination.

Can we hear ... what an upsetting ... exciting ... world-reversing ... disruptive message ... this must have been ... to those whose faith was based upon assumptions of partiality.

I imagine it was not an easy word to hear.

Now ... it remained for Peter to justify his position by Scripture ... which would be no easy task. And we will notice his speech was more than “proof texting.”

Because the central affirmation of Christ's Lordship ... is a confessional statement from the heart ... gleaned from the experience ... and from the faith of the apostles ... it was not something he proved from the Torah or the prophets.

Peter's sermon ... had to struggle with his recently received ... new perception of the Christian message ... he gave no proof text to justify himself. ...

He was where ... no preacher ever wants to go.

Think about that for a minute.

And faith, when it comes down to it, sometimes is our breathless attempt ... to keep up with the redemptive activity of God ... to keep asking ourselves ... **“What on earth is God doing now, where is God going now, or is this just nuts?”**

Now, I remember this type of tension in the charismatic renewal ... where the Holy Spirit was

leading into a new experiences of worship ... to different leadership approaches ... to a recovery of our understanding of conversion ... to the priority of the Bible, and so on.

I have very clear memories ... on how this was seen as ... disruptive and unwelcome ... to the church ... and its leadership at the time.

So, we should not be too surprised ... if sometimes we feel God ... the God we have defined for ourselves ... is too small.

And that we are required to think ... in expansive and generous ways ... as the Lord begins to do something new in our lives.

SCENE SIX (10:44–48): ... IS WHERE WE WITNESS THE DIVINE VALIDATION OF PETER'S MESSAGE

Well, any doubts about the validity of Peter's new insight into the impartiality of the gospel ... are removed by the baptism – or the outpouring - of the Holy Spirit ... which descended on Cornelius ... and on his household.

So, in addition, any potential problem like ... the water baptism of gentiles ... is also settled ... for who could possibly forbid water baptism ... after the Holy Spirit has already baptised these people (10:47)?

The wind of the Holy Spirit had blown ... where it wills (John 3:8), and the church had to account for its movements ... and I suggest ... not unlike what we have to ... sometimes do today.

SCENE SEVEN (11:1–18): INVOLVES PETER BEING HELD TO ACCOUNT BY THE GOVERNANCE OF THE CHURCH

The proclamation of the gospel should never be about the solo efforts of one enlightened and

progressive leader ... who takes it upon himself or herself ... to go out on a limb in ministry.

You see ... when Peter returned to Jerusalem ... he had some explaining to do to the leadership.

But the real “hero” of this development, the “star” of the seven act drama is not ... Peter nor ... Cornelius ... but God.

And, moreover, it is interesting to note ... the leaders in Jerusalem ... replied to Peter ... that the Gentiles like Cornelius were included ... not because they were nice people ... who were kind and helpful ... but because ... like Israel ... they were able to repent.

They said to Peter,

18 When they heard this, they had no further objections and praised God, saying, “So then, even to Gentiles God has granted repentance that leads to life.”

And here is an important point ... and certainly one of the most important in this morning's reading from Acts ... repentance ... contrary to popular misconception ... is more than a humble first step one makes toward Christ ... nor is it simply a feeling-sorry-for my sins.

No. It is a divine gift ... of being able to be turned towards the truth.

And that is because ... turning towards the truth about myself ... and my situation ... is quite beyond my power to accomplish.

Like Cornelius, we cannot repent - turn around - on our own.

So, God does it for us.

In Christ, God has turned toward us and "granted" ... or given ... us repentance (5:31; 11:18).

That is a stark biblical truth.

And it is extraordinary to note ... that Cornelius ... was surprisingly passive ... in this entire account.

He was someone who was swept along ... carried by events ... and reacted to actions ... quite beyond his power to initiate or to control.

Now, I am absolutely convinced ... this is an important understanding we need to recover today.

Repentance is more than a decision we make.

You know, you hear people say **“since I gave my life to Christ”** or **“since I took Jesus as my personal Savior”** or some such words ... and to be honest I have said that type of thing myself ... because it was true ... but it was a half-truth.

The whole-truth is ...

Repentance ... begins with God turning toward us ... then God turns us towards himself ... the joyful human response ... to God's offer of himself to us. In repentance ... God is front ... and centre.

So, here is a key point ... in this sense, repentance is an act of God's grace.

And repentance leads to the conversion experience ... where the Holy Spirit ... enters our life and changes us.

And magnificently ... everyone, says Peter (10:43) ... Jew or gentile ... virtuous pagans, like Cornelius ... or zealous persecutors, like Saul ... may now turn, to God ... and be converted.

So, Saul ... who became Paul ... later on wrote ... that gentile Christians ... like Cornelius ... were

“separated from Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near in the blood of Christ. For he is our peace, who has made us both one, and has broken down the dividing wall of hostility, ...” (Eph. 2:12–14).

And we should also notice conversions in Acts of the Apostle ... are accounts about beginnings ...

the beginning of a new chapter in the life of the church ...

the initiation of a new mission ...

as well as the beginning of a new life for the individual person.

Conversion is the beginning of the Christian journey ... not its destination.

Similarly, we should note and underline ...
conversions in the Book of Acts ...

are accounts about the activity of God ...

God is the chief actor ...

in all the accounts of conversion.

Even the smallest details are attributed to the
working of God.

So, we need to understand conversion is not the
direct result of skillful leadership ...

or evangelistic innovation by the community ...

or persuasive preaching.

In the account of Peter and Cornelius ... the young developing church ... was dragged, kicking, and screaming, so to speak ... into the movement of God.

And we notice that manipulation, strategic planning, and sophisticated efforts ... aimed at church growth ... were utterly absent. So that is a curiosity isn't it!

Peter later wrote that conversion is a surprising ... unexpected ... act of divine grace.

“By his great mercy we have been born anew to a living hope ...” 1 Peter 1:3b

Today, perhaps many associate conversions with the excesses of aggressive evangelism ... or razzle-dazzle electronic worship services.

Hmmm.

In a time when there is much talk ... of the need ... for more organized ... and thoughtfully

managed methods of church life ... and mission, the conversion accounts ... in Acts of the Apostle ... raise some tough questions.

In Acts ... conversion is the result of one's encounter with the person of the Holy Spirit.

These accounts are primarily ... but not exclusively ... about God's actions ... and we do well to reflect on this ... and what our possible role might be ... going forward.

AMEN