

**Now I understand.**

I believe this is one of the most important passages of the whole New Testament, because up until then, what we now call Christianity, was nothing more than a Jewish sect, no different from others that had existed before it. What happens in this reading today, was something nobody was expecting, and they really didn't know what to do about it once it happened. This is the moment that all that was past turned head over heels, and nothing was to be the same ever again. And this passage has not been considered with the importance it should have.

Two hugely different people having a vision, hearing a voice calling them to do something unexpected.

- Cornelius is a nice chap, but... he happens to be a gentile and not only a gentile but an officer of the occupation army that responds to Caesar. A nice chap, but... and yet he has this vision and a voice that says he should reach out to Peter who is in Joppa.
- Peter, well we all know Peter – the impetuous one, and yet called to be the rock. His vision is more disturbing: a large sheet filled with impure animals (see Lev 11), the animals no Jew should touch, even less eat. Peter is hungry and the voice says to him three times: Get up, kill, eat. And Peter comes out with the response one would expect: Never Lord, these are unclean. To which God shocks him and us and everybody: **Don't call unclean what God has made clean.** But it was God who had initially declared them unclean....

Do we understand what is going on? The worlds of two opposing life realities were coming into contact. Would this be something that could produce a confrontation or increase of hatred? Well, initially Peter accepts to go with Cornelius' envoys, and he not only goes, but he enters Cornelius' house – he does mention that he only does that because God has said it would be OK. And this a chance for these two men, living such a strange situation tell each other their story.

And then Peter proclaims the “bomb explosion” of words, ***NOW I UNDERSTAND*** that it is true God shows no partiality... this is unheard of. This is not possible. The correct way of faithful life was clear – it is US here and THEM over there. As it continues to be for so much of life (but I'll come back to that in a moment).

And Peter shares the message of Jesus with the household, Peter had not finished speaking when the Holy Spirit entered and took over...like that day of Pentecost. So, what can he do? He asks the great question: Can anyone withhold the water of baptism when the Holy Spirit has made it so clear? And they were baptised. The complete reverse order of things. Something that really upset the structure of the early church, so much so they must call a Council in Jerusalem to decide the official policy to follow (See Acts ch 15), as so often the church reacts to instead of creating situations.

Today is August 6<sup>th</sup> Hiroshima Day...thousands of people back in 1945 killed in an instant, not combatants, but women, children, old people, men... in a fraction of time in Hiroshima and Nagasaki over 220,000 people exterminated. What is the moral compass the church has on this and other horrendous issues we face day by day?

Over 2000 years later we are confronted by similar realities, no longer a household of Gentiles, but certainly by other realities. Who are the acceptable, good people? Who are the doubtful, we aren't too sure about people? Why such a continuous debate around matters of race, sexual orientation, place of origin, refugees, asylum seekers... why is the matter such a contentious one? What haven't we understood of today's reading? Why are we declaring impure those who God has declared clean?

The excluding experience I have suffered has not been in cases like this but rather in those who believe they possess the only God-like truth. Wherever they come from.

Let me conclude with a short story about this.... The World Alliance of Reformed Churches was holding its Executive Committee meeting in Tondano, North Sulawesi, Indonesia. The meeting took place in a church and one morning I get there early and there is a police bomb-squad, so I speak to one of the police and ask what is going on. "Your meeting had been threatened" By whom I ask. And the response is one I have never forgotten. "Take your pick - by fundamentalist Christians because you are having conversations with Muslim leaders on the island, and by fundamentalist Muslims because you are Christians meeting with Muslim leaders." There and then I realised the danger were not the Muslim or the Christian believers. They were not US/THEM in the people we had been meeting and talking to, the issue was the word that defined them: *fundamentalist*. It wasn't the Gentile or the Believer (following the Bible reading this morning) who were dangerous, it was the fundamentalist ideology that was the danger. It was that which wanted to blow us up. You've realised that nothing happened to us.

This is what it means when in the reading today we hear and read the words: Now I understand, what God has declared clean we should not call unclean. And this is a lesson we are not too good at learning. Even today. We still have a lot to learn of what being faithful to calling of the one who is Creator, Liberator and Sustainer of all life is about. Amen.