

Cornelius the Centurion

17 5 09

God our Redeemer,
you have delivered us from the powers of darkness
and brought us into the kingdom of your Son:
grant, that as by his death he has recalled us to life,
so by his continued presence in us he may raise us to eternal joy.

My text this morning may be found in today's passage from Acts, 'Can anyone withhold the water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?' (10 v47)

Last Sunday, we looked at the conversion and baptism of the unnamed Ethiopian Eunuch in Acts 8. This week, having leapt over the conversion and baptism of St Paul in Acts chapter 9, we come to a short parallel passage in Acts 10, the conversion and baptism of Cornelius, a Roman centurion, and his entire household.

Peter is in Joppa staying at the house of Simon, a tanner. Hungry, waiting in the shade of the roof for his midday meal, Peter falls asleep and has a triple vision from God that all living creatures created by God are clean and pure, thereby sweeping aside the whole edifice of kosher food laws and the necessary ritual impurity associated with being a Gentile, a non-Jew. Just as Peter is reflecting on

his vision, the Holy Spirit speaks directly to him and tells him of Cornelius, a centurion in the Italian cohort garrisoned at Caesarea, a God-fearing man who is well regarded by the Jews of that city, who himself has had a vision from God that he should send to Joppa for Peter so that he could hear what Peter has to say to him.

They set off for Caesarea next day, Peter being accompanied by some believers from Joppa, and he is enthusiastically received by Cornelius who has invited close friends and relatives to hear him. Cornelius explains what led him to invite Peter to come to him. Then Peter begins to outline the gospel message: that Jesus of Nazareth was anointed by God with Holy Spirit; that he went about doing good and healing people; that he was crucified and died but on the third day rose again. Now his followers have a duty to spread the good news that everyone who believes in him will receive forgiveness of sins through his name.

And so we come to today's passage that even while Peter was still speaking, the listeners, Gentiles all, were suddenly and unexpectedly filled with the Holy Spirit and start to speak in tongues. And so today's text, Peter's question, 'Can anyone withhold the water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?'

Last week's passage and today's passage are closely paralleled. They raise the question, 'Who was the first Gentile convert to Christianity?' Acts records two traditions. Was it the Ethiopian Eunuch by Philip the Deacon or was it Cornelius the Centurion and his entire household close friends and family by Peter the

Apostle? The more developed account is that by Peter. It is possible that the Eunuch was already a proselyte, a convert to Judaism, but I think Deuteronomy 23 v1 makes that unlikely if due regard is placed on what that verse implies: that only a man who is physically wholly a man can be a practising Jew. But there is no doubt here as to Cornelius's status as a foreigner, a non-Jew, a Gentile who is nonetheless a good, God-fearing man who lives a life of prayer and charity.

Finally, it is worth asking to whom Peter's question in my text is addressed: 'Can anyone withhold the water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?' The immediate answer is the small group of believers from Joppa who have accompanied Peter to Caesarea. Peter is asking for confirmation of what he knows in his heart to be true; what he sees rationally that God is doing: opening up salvation to all without the necessity of first becoming Jewish. But the question is also addressed to the wider church, to all Christian believers, first at the Council of Jerusalem at which Peter defended and successfully justified his action in the face of Jewish Christian opposition and finally, it is addressed to all believers throughout time ourselves included.

This single verse Acts 10 v37 is, believe it or not, a major turning point in our Christian history. It obviates, gets rid of, the necessity of being circumcised and allows us to go straight to faith in Christ without first converting to Judaism. In so doing, Christianity has become a religion in its own right, not an off-shoot of Judaism.

To conclude, we can see that today's short passage from Acts is but the tip of an iceberg containing as it does this truth: that God is a God for all people in all places and at all times. There are no restrictions to his love and he wants us all to come into a living relationship with him.

I have spoken in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,
Amen.

Preached at the Eucharist

St Bartholomew's Dinard

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H: Sermon 20: Cornelius

