

Why not Jewish ?

28 4 13

Almighty God,
who through your only- begotten Son Jesus Christ
have overcome death and opened to us
the gate of everlasting life:
grant that, as by your grace going before us,
you put into our minds good desires,
so by your continual help
we may bring them to good effect.

Our text today is from Acts chapter 11 verses 2 and 3:

'When Peter went up to Jerusalem, the circumcised believers criticised him saying,
"Why do you go to uncircumcised men and eat with them ?"'

How well do you know your Bible ? How well do you expect your vicar, someone you respect like Father Richard to know the Bible ? It is reasonable to expect a properly ordained priest in the Church of God, not least a proper priest in the Anglican Communion, to be familiar with the word of God. But I must confess to you, good folk, here in Old Heath, that reading the passage from Acts 11 set this morning came something of a surprise to me as I prepared this sermon. It was a surprise not because the passage was unfamiliar but because I'd forgotten that immediately following the original, more detailed account, of the incident in Acts

10 is this fairly detailed summary of what you would have just read, in part almost word for word the same !

It's a familiar story of Peter, hungry and asleep on a roof of Simon the tanner's house by the sea in Joppa, happily dozing the time away while waiting for his lunch. And, in his dream, three times Peter sees what seems to be a large sheet being lowered from heaven containing a rich variety of living creatures and he hears a voice urging him to get up and kill and eat. And when Peter wakes up, he goes off to Caesarea to the house of Cornelius the Centurion where to his amazement the Gentile household is all filled with the Holy Spirit just as the apostles had been on the Day of Pentecost. Because of this act of grace, Peter is moved to baptise them without the necessity of them first becoming Jews.

And there we have the problem and that is why the text is repeated in such detail. In an age of word-processing with seemingly unlimited capacity to store words and data, no one thinks twice about endless repetition. But in the days of scrolls and parchment when materials were scarce and expensive why would Doctor Luke be wasting such valuable space on repeating himself - it only makes sense if what we are reading is a crossroads moment in the growth of the Early Church which needs to be stressed and emphasised by its close repetition.

I was going to start my sermon by asking how many ladies in the congregation keep a kosher kitchen - the answer I am sure is none. I was going to ask the men and boys in the congregation how many of them are circumcised and the answer I guess is some. But the fact that as good Christians we neither have to keep

kosher food laws or to be circumcised, tells us that Christianity and Judaism have parted company on such pretty basic teaching.

The rules for Kosher food if you're interested can be found in Leviticus 11. The injunction to be circumcised and to circumcise begins with the covenant between God and Abraham and may be found in Genesis 17. Jesus and John the Baptist we know were both circumcised when they were eight days old but we no longer have to be. Why not? Because of the passage we have heard read to us this morning which changes everything. Most if not all of the early Christians were Jews. No problem then in eating kosher food or being circumcised – everyone did and everyone was. So it is not surprising that some of these circumcised Jewish Christians should criticise Peter for going into a Gentile house to eat non-kosher, unclean, trefah food with uncircumcised Gentiles! And the justification for Peter to do so – a dream, a vision repeated three times and a voice from heaven saying: **'What God has made clean, you must not call profane.'** But actually what is truly surprising is not the dream but the waking fact that Gentiles are baptised and filled by the Holy Spirit without having first to become Jews. And that, my friends, is the beginning of the serious gap which will open up between those who recognised Jesus as the Messiah and those who didn't.

Thank God that what makes us clean in the sight of God is not the food we eat and what makes us Christians is not the cross we wear round our necks outside or underneath our clothing or whether we are circumcised in the flesh but it is the state of our hearts and minds, informed by the grace we receive from believing in

Jesus Christ as our Lord and Saviour and by the welcome and active presence of the Holy Spirit in our lives.

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

Preached at the Eucharist

St Barnabas, Old Heath

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G: Sermon 27 : Y nt Jewish

