

Acts 11:1-18 Sermon

Sometimes we are blinded by our own cultural assumptions. Sometimes we can find that our engrained ways of doing things or seeing issues can blind us to the movements of God. Sometimes it is only through prayer that we can be released by God to a transformation in our pre-existing ideas. Today's reading is one of those moments, and I believe it is hugely significant for us today.

We live at a time of monumental shift in the way we see the world, the way we live, and the way we believe or view our beliefs. Our whole way of living has been transformed in only about 25 years by the internet, and we are still reeling from the change forced upon us by Covid. Our world has changed beyond recognition in what is in history a relative blink of an eye.

In these times of huge change, it is so easy to be unaware of the assumptions we each bring into our vision of the world and how it should be. We can so easily become blind or partially sighted when it comes to new things, especially of God. There's a huge amount of research that suggests that churches are important to society simply because they are an anchor in an ever-changing landscape, and yet we all know how even what we mean by church has changed or is changing around us.

And then, added to all this, there's the ultimate culture shock, which for some of us is so long ago that we don't even remember it – there's the culture shock of putting Jesus first in our lives and taking up the mantle of being another of his disciples, building God's Kingdom here on earth. In our individual-focussed lives, this is perhaps the biggest culture shock of all.

And that's why we are going to look at Peter's report to the church in Jerusalem today – as a way of opening our eyes to the blind spots we see, and challenging us to help those who are experiencing the shock of coming into God's family, to orient themselves – not as we would like them to be – but as they can be as Jesus's follower.

In the story this morning, Peter reports his own cultural transformation and the difficulties he had in accepting it. Three times God had to give him the same vision before he could accept and process what it meant. Jewish food laws were so deeply part of him that he just couldn't accept any change – arguing with God himself that these foods were not clean and therefore he wouldn't obey. We struggle to understand these food laws today mostly: we tend to think of food as nice or not nice, rather than clean, profane or unclean. We don't need to understand it to understand Peter though. Just think of anything you hold dear as part of your spiritual life and imagine being asked to dismiss it. In one of CS Lewis's books in his science fiction series, the main character is asked to damage a crucifix and refuses. Perhaps that's where you might draw a line. For Peter, God's invitation to eat unclean food ranks with this.

But this culture shock for Peter is only a marker on the road for God. Enabling Peter to accept unclean food, leads to Peter's dinner with gentiles from Caesarea – something which would have been ludicrous and blasphemous when he had breakfast that morning. It leads to the gentiles accepting the message of Jesus and being touched by the Holy Spirit. Peter ends up not only accepting gentile believers into the faith, but advocating for them in Jerusalem with the rest of the apostles. How a few hours can change things! The Holy Spirit's movement is ahead of Peter's cultural understanding, and Peter must simply try to catch up.

He then goes to Jerusalem and tells his story. Faced with criticism that he not only brought these men into the faith, but even ate with them, Peter has to explain that if God has given them the same gift of his Spirit that he has given the Jewish believers, then refusing these men would be hindering

God. Again, unheard of – gentiles were thus admitted to the people of God – a people who for thousands of years had thought themselves set apart. The cultural shock must have been immense.

So for us, in our ever-changing climate, what is this story of the removal of what seems an out-dated barrier to do with us?

As I've already hinted, the biggest culture shock in the modern day can be the decision to follow Jesus and live putting God first above ourselves. This is a challenging vision for any of us – how many of us can truly say we live every moment of our lives as if we were citizens of God's Kingdom on earth? That each word we utter is fit to be heard within that Kingdom? And that the way we spend our lives – energy, time and money – is for the sake of God's Kingdom? Anyone? And yet, this is the culture shock that is involved in being Christian. For those of us who've been around the Christian block, we need to hear this challenge again, but for those of us who are new, we need help to get oriented - What does it mean to live in God's Kingdom? How are we part of God's story in Britain today? What are the road signs to help us map out this new life?

However, there's another culture shock awaiting us here. The Christian Gospel, the Good News of Jesus, is open to all. I know that sounds like old news, but until we truly recognise it, it is not old. We may not believe we explicitly deny anyone entry into the Kingdom, but do we accidentally stand in the way? Are there certain types of people who may not find our welcome as warm as others might? Do our theological quibbles about certain lifestyles or orientations make us less affirming of certain people's place in God's Church? God's Kingdom is full of the variety of human life and none are excluded from finding a place within it. If we, as individuals or as a church make the Gospel any less open to all, maybe by attaching bells and whistles to it so it becomes hard to see, we are truly guilty and are on the wrong side of the debate here in today's reading.

The Gospel is open to all.

However, let's also just look to the last verse where all the people praised God saying 'Then God has given even to the Gentiles the repentance that leads to life.' The same Gospel is open to all, but it also makes the same demands on all of us. Here we find, like before, the two-pronged application; first to us – do we find ourselves following a Gospel that makes no demands of us, or do we celebrate the fact we are included in the repentance that leads to life? And then second, do we place heavier burdens on some people as they enter the church than those we place upon ourselves? The Gospel is for all, but that's not the same as it making no demands on us. We should all know by now, that God demands our whole selves as Jesus' disciples. The Gospel demands that we know this, and that others know this too – not more than us, but the same as us – we are all under the same Gospel and the same repentance.

So today, let's hear the culture shock again of a gospel which is open to all, but demands everything. A gospel which tears down barriers to God's Kingdom, but then demands loyal citizenship from all. Let's feel the difficulties of our brothers and sisters in adapting to this news, just as hard as it was for Peter and the apostles. Let's help each other as we search for signposts of the kingdom in the new world we inhabit where things aren't what they were. Let's feel that it isn't the church, but Jesus, that is our anchor in shifting sands, and that all may come to him, whoever they are, and whoever we are. Amen.