

The Scope of the Mission: Cornelius Conversion

1. Intro

- Jane Austen's – Pride and Prejudice is a wonderful and entertaining story that also just happens to expose the prejudice with the human heart
- We see it in particular
 - Darcy's struggle to fall in love with Elizabeth due to her inferior social standing and lack of family wealth
 - Elizabeth on the other hand prided herself on her discernment and emotional stability ... over the folly and hysteria of her mother and sisters
- Prejudice exists within each and every one of us ... that invariably leads to
 - Pride
 - Discrimination
 - Injustice
 - Condescension
- It's born out of the lie the ones race, social standing, income, intelligence, gender or abilities are superior to others
 - It divides families, communities and nations
- You only had to see what racial prejudice did in ...
 - Nazi Germany, Rwanda, Bosnia and Tasmania
- But prejudice exists within the church too
 - The Dutch Reformed Church in South Africa developed a theological justification to support Apartheid
- And it's not just in South Africa ... it's here too
 - I've heard many times, that Anglican ministers are unwilling to come to the poorer and more ethnically diverse suburbs of the Georges River Region
 - The reason ...
 - Because they feel God is calling them to do ministry in the Eastern Suburbs or North Shore or ...
 - Now why is that?
 - An unwillingness to take the gospel to those who are different to you
- In Acts 10 ... the Apostle Peter is unwilling to take the gospel to Cornelius ... who's a Roman Centurion and therefore a Gentile and complete outsider

- But if God's offer of forgiveness was to go to the ends of the earth, as Jesus commanded ... then prejudice will need to be defeated in the hearts of his people ... even the Apostle Peter
- And if we're serious in our vision here at C@P to see everyone in Peakhurst and beyond transformed by the good news of Jesus ... then we too are going to have to humbly examine our own hearts for prejudice
- Because prejudice will stop the gospel going out
- We're told about Peter here in Acts 10 so we might examine our hearts
- And so this morning I want to look at Acts 10 under two headings:
 - The gospel confronts racial prejudice
 - The gospel confronts religious piety

2. The Gospel Confronts Racial Prejudice

- Pick up the story in v9
- Setting is Joppa > it's about 50km south of Caesarea where Cornelius lives
- Luke tells us that Peter was up on the roof praying
- While he was on the roof he had a triple vision
- Three times he had a vision of animals (clean and unclean) being lowered down on a sheet from heaven
 - Three times he was told by God to get up and eat
 - Three times he said ... "No I'm not going to, I don't eat unclean food"
 - Three times he was corrected by God and told not to call unclean what God called clean
- Peter is still thinking like a Jew
 - Remember this is the earliest days of church ... and nearly all the church at this point were Jews
 - Here is Peter – the senior leader of the church ... a Christian ... but he's still thinking like and behaving like a Jew
 - He has much to learn what it means to be disciple of Jesus
 - The gospel still has to do its work in transforming Peter's prejudice
- The Old Testament Law, including the food laws were meant to be a signpost to the pagan nations that the Israelites different
 - It was to show the nations that God's people were distinct and operated in a way that was completely counter-cultural to the rest of the world
 - The intention was that Israel would be a light to the Gentiles who would be drawn to God and therefore blessed by him

- But the Jews had turned their distinctiveness into **exclusiveness** ... and had become convinced that God played **favourites** and they were his
- And Peter and the Jerusalem Christians still carried this deep seated prejudice that meant they considered themselves superior to the non-Jews / Gentiles
- God needed to put a bomb under Peter and the Jerusalem Christians and wake them up to ensure his mission to all the nations would be fulfilled
- Because if Peter stumbled here ... then it would have resulted in a very divided and hostile church ... rather than a body of believers that were one in Christ
- And Acts 10-11 highlights the lengths God must go to overturn Peter's prejudice and convince Peter that the Gentiles are to be included in the Kingdom of Heaven and therefore the gospel needs to be preached to them as well
- And so God uses
 - visions to Peter
 - visions to Cornelius
 - voices from heaven
 - angel visitations
 - people speaking other languages
 - to convince Peter of this
- And when Peter gets to Cornelius's house ... he finds it's full of Gentiles all waiting to hear what Peter had to say
- And Peter says v 28
 - *"You are well aware that it is against our law for a Jew to associate with a Gentile or visit him. But God has shown me that I should not call any man impure or unclean.*
- Finally ... Peter is beginning to see the truth
 - He rightly applies the meaning of the vision to people not food!
 - People that God has made! ... made to hear the gospel and be saved through the death and resurrection of Jesus
- And so Peter's prejudices are beginning to break down
 - God helps him to see he should never call anyone impure or unclean
- So he knows all people are clean ... but still doesn't realise why God brought him to Cornelius house
- Because he says in v29 ...

- *"Here I am! Now why am I here?"*
- He hasn't worked out that he should preach the gospel to them
- It hasn't sunk in that Israel's Messiah is Lord and Saviour of ALL nations
- In v30-33 Cornelius recounts his vision and tells Peter
 - *"Now we are all here in the presence of God to listen to everything the Lord has commanded you to tell us."*

- And finally ...
 - He sees the light
 - The penny drops
 - And Peter realises that the message of the gospel that's been given to him and the other apostles is to be proclaimed to the gentiles
 - And so he says in v34-35
 - *"I now realize how true it is that God does not show favoritism but accepts men from **every nation** who fear him and do what is right"*
- Peter sees finally sees there's no favouritism with God
 - Gospel is for people of every nation, tribe and language
 - It was a break though moment for Peter!

- **Application**
- Of course Peter knew the gospel ...
 - And he knew it was for all nations ... Jesus had told him and the other disciples before he ascended back to heaven ... to be my witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea and Samaria and the to the ends of the earth
 - But Peter needed transforming
 - The gospel hadn't worked its way into his heart to change his prejudices

- That's what the gospel does
- It breaks down the prejudices of our heart
 - We all have them ... whether your Christian or not
 - We all have people that we avoid
- Who are the people you instinctively distance yourself from?
- What is about them that stops you speaking to them?
- Is it ...
 - Those whose skin colour is not the same as yours
 - Those who wear the garb of another religion
 - Those of a different social class
 - People with piercings or with tattoos
 - People **without** piercings and tattoos you won't speak to!

- People with sandals and socks!
- People in wheelchairs
- Those with a mental disability
- People who smoke or drink or swear
- Those who are more intelligent than you ... or less intelligent than you

- But the gospel breaks down those barriers
 - The good news of Jesus ... is able to transform our hearts and minds to let go of our prejudices
- Why ...
- Because the gospel says ... there is no difference between us
 - We are **all** sinners saved by grace
 - There's nothing about us that means we can save ourselves
 - Therefore, there's nothing about us that means we're superior to others
- As Paul says in Galatians 3:28
 - *There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.*

- Prejudice is a denial of God's grace to you in Jesus Christ
 - Prejudice is a form of self-righteousness ... a way to feel acceptable and worthwhile on our own merits
- But the gospel reminds us that our real identity is in Christ
 - Not in our race, wealth, social class, education or anything other factor we look to that gives identity and makes us feel superior to others

- Have you had that break through moment like Peter
 - Do you see how the gospel must break down the prejudices and barriers you've erected in your heart against people who are different to you?

- The gospel > the good news of Jesus > crucified, risen, reigning and returning ... is a transforming gospel
- The gospel is powerful enough to transform the deepest and most secret prejudices in the hearts of all who hear it

- And this is especially true when it comes to sharing the gospel
- Our Vision is to see everyone in Peakhurst and beyond transformed by the good news of Jesus
- That means reaching
 - Anglo's, Greeks, Macedonians, Serbians, Chinese, Maoris, Lebanese who live in our suburbs

- It means reaching
 - Blue collar workers, white collar workers
- It means reaching the those in housing commission; and
- It means reaching those of other faiths
- And unless you and I allow the gospel of grace to penetrate deep into our hearts to overcome your prejudices ... then you and I aren't going to want to share the gospel with them

- Without a doubt Sydney is one of the most multi-cultural cities in the world
 - And the Georges River Region is most multi-cultural region of our very multi-cultural city

- How wonderful it is that God is bringing the nations here?
- Do you doubt for a moment that this is all part of God's purpose ... that all these people who are
 - moving to our country and
 - moving to our region and
 - moving to our suburbs ... is
 - so that they can hear the gospel of the Lord's Jesus Christ ...
 - who died for their sin; and
 - offers them the rest and peace they are searching for!?

- Do you doubt for a moment that God wants them to come and hear the good news of Christ ... so they may have a home infinitely better than the one they left behind or the one they are seeking to establish here?!
- And while they may become citizens of Australia ...
 - when they come to know and trust in Jesus Christ ...
 - you can tell them
 - they become citizens of heaven and residents of a better home and a better country ...
 - For there is an eternal dwelling and none of us are home until we get there
 - And I can tell you who knows the way ... because he has gone ahead to prepare a room for you in the Father's house ...
 - I can show you the one who can take you home
- Because when you understand the gospel and allow it to penetrate your heart ... it will confront your prejudices and break down the barriers you have to sharing the gospel with those who are different to you

3. Gospel Confronts Religious Piety

- Not only does the gospel confront our racial prejudice ... but the gospel also confronts our religious piety
- And we see that with Cornelius
 - We're told in v1 he's a Roman Centurion
 - Which means he's a soldier > he's powerful > he's wealthy > he has influence
 - And yet obviously not happy because he's seeking the God of the Jews
- Have a look at v2
 - *He and all his family were devout and God-fearing; he gave generously to those in need and prayed to God regularly.*
- So we see that Cornelius was a good man and a religious man
 - He's a Gentile worshipper of Israel's God
 - He seeks to obey the OT Law
 - He prays regularly and
 - He gives generously to the poor ...
- But none of this means that he is saved!
- Why?
- Firstly ... because of the lengths God goes to make sure that the gospel which saves will reach him and that Cornelius knows he needs to hear this message to be saved.
- We see in v4-6 God sends an angel to Cornelius!
 - *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."*
 - The angel says ... "we've seen your religion, now send for Peter who has what you need"
 - Send for the man that can bring you the gospel that saves ... because your religiosity and your piety are not enough
- And when Peter arrives and asks why he has been sent for ... Cornelius responds in v33
 - *"Now we are all here in the presence of God to listen to everything the Lord has commanded you to tell us."*
 - Cornelius knows there's a vital message he needs to hear but he doesn't know what the message is
 - He needs to hear the gospel from Peter

- He's not saved by his good works and religious devotion
- And so when Peter recounts the story to the church in Jerusalem in 11:13 ... he says
 - *"He [Cornelius] told us how he had seen an angel appear in his house and say, 'Send to Joppa for Simon who is called Peter. ¹⁴ He will bring you a message through which you and all your household will be saved."*
- Second reason that Cornelius is not saved by his good works and devotion is because
 - The message Peter brings him ... is the message of peace through Jesus Christ who is Lord of all
 - Peter says ... 'Peace with God comes through Jesus Christ ... not through your religious piety and morality'
 - It's the good news of Jesus that saves
 - And this gospel message is for people from every nation including you
- And in v36-43 ... Peter shares the message that saves with Cornelius and all his household ... and it is the same gospel message that Peter preached in Jerusalem
 - v38 – he was anointed with the HS
 - v39 – they killed him > they hung him on a tree
 - That's theological or technical phrase from the OT
 - Peter could have just said they hung him on a cross
 - But Cornelius probably knew enough of the OT to know that according to the OT Law, to be hung on a tree is to be cursed by God
 - And if Jesus was cursed by God he therefore carried the curse
 - And if Jesus carried the curse, there is no curse for the believer
 - v40 – God raised him and caused him to be seen
 - There are many eye witnesses who saw him alive ... including more than 500 at one time the Apostle Paul says in 1 Cor 15
 - v42 – he's been appointed by God to be the judge of the living and the dead – and so all mankind will one day are going to meet him
 - v43 – everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins and is ready to meet him with joy
- So there's the message
- Peter says to them all ...
 - I want you to listen and I want you to believe
 - I have no rules for you ... I have no regulations

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- I have no ceremonies, no deadlines, no expectations of a human kind ..
I just want you to listen and believe
 - If you listen and believe that's all that matters

 - Cornelius's morality and religiosity cannot save him from God's wrath against human sin
 - Forgiveness comes only through Jesus ... who died who was raised, and is now the judge of the living and the dead
 - And that forgiveness is available to people from every nation

 - Imagine if you're brand new here today and you've never heard the gospel and you don't know anything about Christianity ... I'd tell you what Peter says here to Cornelius
 - First he was anointed by God – that's why his life was so perfect
 - He was killed and hung on a tree and bore the curse of sin for you
 - He was raised, - people saw him alive, and ate with him and drank with him
 - He's been appointed the judge and therefore everyone including you will meet him
 - He gives forgiveness of sins which you can freely receive and be washed and cleansed and made pure and accepted by God
 - And therefore you can meet him with joy
 - There are no rules ... no regulations ... no ceremonies ... just these five facts

 - And we say along with Peter ... "we want you to believe the facts about Jesus"

 - Third reason that Cornelius was not saved by his religious piety is because..
 - It's only once they hear and believe the gospel that they receive the HS
 - *v44-47 – "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 [Jewish Christians from Jerusalem) were astonished that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on the Gentiles. ⁴⁶ For they heard them speaking in tongues and praising God. Then Peter said, ⁴⁷ "Can anyone keep these people from being baptized with water? They have received the Holy Spirit just as we have."*

 - After Peter shared the gospel to them ...
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- they hear it ... they believe it
- and as a result God's spirit fell on them ...
- There was no ceremony ... there was no laying on of hands
 - They began speaking in other languages, just like had happened on the day of Pentecost with the Jewish Christians in Jerusalem
- God converted them ... and then they were baptized in the name of Jesus Christ

- Note that God's mercy is found in Jesus Christ
 - There is no other way that you and I would find and receive God's mercy apart from the Lord Jesus Christ
 - It's only in him for all who believe
 - But there is no mercy outside of Christ
- For all his goodness and devotion and piety and religiosity ... Cornelius still needed to hear and respond to the gospel if he was going to have peace and reconciliation and forgiveness with God

- Because Jesus is God's firebreak
 - When you stand in Christ ... alongside Christ ... no fire of God's justice and judgment can touch you
 - And therefore ... we love people not by telling them they can stand anywhere they like ...
 - We love them by telling them to stand in the firebreak called Jesus Christ

- Here's Cornelius ... he's a very good man, a devout man, a generous man, a pious man
 - Does the Lord say to him ... "that's fine, all's well?"
 - Does Peter come to him and say
 - "You're very sincere man, you're a very kind man, you're fine?"

- No ... all those things are not enough
 - He needs Peter to come so he can hear the gospel
 - He needs to listen to the gospel and believe it and stand in the fire break of Jesus Christ for his salvation

- I want you to forget about the gospel that goes like this
 - Perform and you'll be accepted by God
 - Forget about that gospel ... it's not the Christian gospel
- The gospel of Jesus Christ **does not** say perform and you'll be accepted

- The gospel of Jesus Christ says Jesus Christ performed ... and therefore you are accepted
 - He lived the life
 - He died the death
 - He rose from the grave
 - If you believe that you are accepted

4. Conclusion

- The gospel of Jesus ...
 - the proclamation that he is Lord and Messiah
 - the message of forgiveness of sins in his name
- Is for
 - every culture
 - every family,
 - people of every kind of
 - background, education, social standing, age,
 - people
 - like us, not like us
 - those
 - we like and
 - those we find difficult
- It is for the
 - gentle Buddhist
 - zealous Hindu
 - prayerful Muslim
 - reserved church goer
 - good willed atheist and
 - laid back Aussie
- The gospel is for all ... the gospel is needed by all ...
 - The gospel confronts racial prejudice
 - The gospel confronts religious piety
- And when that is true ... then we will see God's vision of Revelation 7 fulfilled ...
 - *I looked and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and in front of the Lamb. ... ¹⁰ And they cried out in a loud voice: "Salvation belongs to our God, who sits on the throne, ... Praise and glory and wisdom and thanks and honor and power and strength be to our God forever and ever. Amen!" - Revelation 7:9-12*

PRAY