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Easter 6 (Acts 11.1-18)

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On the front page of yesterday's *Canberra Times* was an article entitled 'ACT priest backs legal blessing for gay unions'. Let me quote from some of it: 'In a notable departure from the public teachings of some church authorities, Dickson-based [Catholic] priest Michael Fallon called for a "public celebration of committed love for homosexual couples", saying he feared ordinary people were being driven away from the Catholic faith by views they saw as hardline and irrelevant'. I wonder what response Father Michael might receive from these church authorities? He is likely, I suspect, to face what Peter did after his adventure with Cornelius. 'Now the apostles and the believers who were in Judea heard that the Gentiles had also accepted the word of God. So when Peter went up to Jerusalem, the circumcised believers criticized him, saying, "Why did you go to uncircumcised men and eat with them?"'

I said a couple of weeks ago that the book of the Acts of the Apostles is an extraordinary account of the process of human beings *learning* God, learning who God is and what godliness looks like in human communities and lives. This is a process, a learning, that is still unfolding, still unfinished. Because when Jesus departs from the disciples and entrusts them with embodying God in the world, he does not leave a blueprint – a pre-determined strategic plan. Instead, he gives them the Holy Spirit – a living, creative, generative energy that invites them to participate in and be transformed by what God is doing within and among them, learning not only to *behave* differently but to *see* differently, learning to let go of rules that had seemed inviolable and to

inhabit forms of human community that had formerly been unthinkable. And this is a process that necessarily generates ambiguity and tension, questions about the direction in which true faithfulness, obedience and godliness actually lie.

In the story of Peter's encounter with Cornelius, the presenting issue is whether Gentiles, non-Jews, those outside the Law and uncircumcised, people who were 'unclean' by definition, whether these too may receive God's Holy Spirit and so come to embody God in the world. This is not our question, and so it is hard for us really to grasp what a huge deal this must have been – how visceral the sense of disgust and contamination Peter must have felt when confronted in his dream by the instruction to eat unclean animals and, later, to enter a Gentile household; how impossible it must have felt that people *like that* could receive the Spirit of the Holy One of Israel and communicate God's presence through their unreconstructed, uncircumcised lives. If we understand his experience in the light of the visceral disgust that informs some cultures' response to menstruating women, homosexuality or those deemed 'untouchable', then clearly what is happening in this New Testament story is the undoing of a powerful religious taboo and a powerful re-envisioning of God.

And this naturally raises the fear, the risk that Peter might have lost the plot altogether. If this distinction goes, then what about others? If what looked like the clear teaching of the Law is disregarded in this matter, than what are the criteria for obedience and righteousness in other areas? You can see why the authorities back in Jerusalem were concerned. You can see why parts of the church continue to grapple with recognisably similar questions.

So, how does this story help us? What does it have to teach us about who God is and so about how we are to live, how we might recognise the forms of community and relationship that are capable of communicating God to the world, even if they challenge certain long-standing religious taboos?

Two things strike me as significant. First, in this story God seems to call into question the whole human tendency to separate ourselves from each other by defining one another according to pre-determined categories as clean or unclean, good or bad, sacred or profane. Peter tells his brothers in Jerusalem that when he was invited to Cornelius' house, 'the Spirit told me ... not to make a distinction between them and us' (Acts 11.12). Earlier, he has acknowledged that 'I truly understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him' (Acts 10.35). And all this follows on from the voice in his dream that has said: 'What God has made clean, you must not call profane'. God is challenging head on the divisions that dominate Peter's imagination – divisions between clean and unclean, Jew and Gentile that structure his sense of his own righteousness and godliness, and the limits of human community.

The gospels speak repeatedly of Jesus' challenge to just this kind of sacred-profane duality, remembering his radical hospitality towards the excluded, the foreign and the religiously unsatisfactory. Even his death enacts his refusal to clutch at a secure form of religious belonging, as he entrusts himself to God through a humiliating death as one who is cursed by the Law.

And Peter's encounter with Cornelius is part of the painful process of the disciples learning this new 'grammar' for God as *they* are asked to let go the old religious taboos which have structured their identities and their righteousness. It takes a while for them to get it - there are many stories in Acts and the letters of Paul about conflicts over circumcision and other religious boundary markers. But what they are being asked to understand, what they are gradually learning, is that there is nothing by definition that is profane or unclean, no food, no person, no nation or disease. There are instead ways of being, forms of life, that are consistent or not with God's merciful and all-embracing love for the world. True godliness, on this account, is intrinsically connected

to catholicity, universality. Despite its innumerable failures in this regard, ‘the whole point of Christianity’, writes theologian James Alison, ‘is to bring down the sort of wall of [false] sacredness which makes universality impossible by having a necessary “other” over against whom we make ourselves “good”’.¹ And this makes Christianity a kind of ‘un-religion’ – not simply different content for the same old religious platform (which almost always relies on taboos, distinctions), but a radically different view of what belonging to God, what goodness, actually means.

And that brings me to profound and simple heart of this story. The source of true godliness is God. It’s not being circumcised; it’s not eating the right food; it’s not having a certain sexual orientation (or not). The source of true godliness is God. Peter tells his concerned fellow apostles in Jerusalem: ‘as I began to speak, the Holy Spirit fell upon them just as it had upon us at the beginning. And I remembered the word of the Lord, how he had said, “John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit”. If then God gave them the same gift that he gave us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could hinder God?’ ‘When they heard this, they were silenced’.

It seems to be so hard for we human beings to accept this, so hard for us to let go of wanting to impose criteria of our own, sacred-profane distinctions, conditions of membership or access. I am *not* saying that belonging to God makes no demands on us. But the call of discipleship is to embody God in the world, not a religious system of our own making. And *God*, the God whose nature is revealed by Jesus and whose energy is given to empower our lives through the Holy Spirit – this God, whether we like it or not, is radically hospitable, radically gracious – a holy love who seeks only to make us whole. And if we are to embody this God in the world, then that calls forth from us that same hospitality, that same graciousness, that same will to embrace and celebrate and enable

¹ Alison, ‘Sacrifice, law and the Catholic faith: is secularity really the enemy?’ in *Broken Hearts & New Creations: Intimations of a Great Reversal* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 2010), pp.73-91, p.88.

the fullest being of each other. The *only* criteria for our belonging is the readiness to receive God's self-gift – the gift in our lives of God's own Spirit, enabling us to be as God and for God in the world. And if this gift is given, wherever this gift is given, then who are we, that we should hinder God?