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On Not Hindering God (Acts 10.44 – 11.18)

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Last week, I commented on the contrasting styles or ‘feel’ of the two New Testament books we read primarily during the season of Easter – the gospel of John and the Acts of the Apostles. And I said that if John offers something like a wholistic, God’s eye perspective on the meaning of Christ and the possibilities of human being, Acts portrays the messy, human process of learning to recognise that meaning and discovering how to respond to its impact.

The story we just heard depicts an absolutely pivotal moment in this process of learning. Theologian James Alison describes it as the account ‘of an extraordinary anthropological earthquake’.¹ It opens a whole new possibility for human community, by means of a radical new understanding of holiness. The significance of this story for the early church is indicated, I think, by the fact that it’s told in great detail twice – once ‘in real time’ as it were and then all over again as Peter is asked to account for his actions to the apostles and believers in Judea.

So let’s recap some of the details. The story, as it’s told in full in Acts 10, starts not with Peter, but with a ‘man named Cornelius, a centurion of the Italian cohort’ in the city of Caesarea. Cornelius, in other words, is ‘a Roman soldier on duty far from home’.² He is described as ‘a devout man who feared God with all his household’ – and James Alison notes that this classifies him among those the Jews recognised as ‘God-fearers’. ‘These were non-Jewish people who had come to believe in the one God of Israel, who worshipped regularly in synagogues ... but who were not prepared

¹ James Alison, *Jesus the Forgiving Victim: Listening for the Unheard Voice*, Book Three: *The difference Jesus makes* (Glenview, IL: Doers Publishing, 2013), p.317. I am indebted to Alison’s discussion of this passage throughout.

² Alison, *The difference Jesus makes*, p.318.

to go through with circumcision, actually convert to Judaism and take on the full yoke of the Law, and its 613 commandments'.³

As Alison goes on to explain: 'This was a completely respectable group of people who were, if you like, half-insiders and half-outsiders. Second-class citizens to be sure, but genuinely welcome in the synagogues where there would be a special area set apart for them'.⁴ Many God-fearers took their religious life very seriously, and Cornelius seems to have been such a one. For, says the text of Acts, 'he gave alms generously to the people and prayed constantly to God' (Acts 10.2). And on one particular afternoon, at about three o'clock, he had a vision 'in which he clearly saw an angel of God coming in' (Acts 10.3). The angel addressed the terrified Cornelius by name and instructed him to send men to Joppa to ask 'for a certain Simon who is called Peter' (Acts 10.5). And Cornelius did what the angel said.

Meanwhile, Peter is going about his business in Joppa. The next day, just 'as [Cornelius's men] were on their journey and approaching the city' (says Acts), Peter has gone up to the roof of the house to pray. It's about noon and he's getting hungry. His lunch is being prepared, but while he's waiting he falls into a trance and sees 'the heaven opened and something like a large sheet coming down, being lowered to the ground by its four corners. In it were all kinds of four-footed creatures and reptiles and birds of the air' (Acts 10.11-12). A voice tells him to 'Get up, Peter, kill and eat'. But Peter, horrified at the suggestion, refuses categorically, saying that nothing unclean has ever passed his lips. The voice says: 'What God has made clean, you must not call profane', and this happens three times, till *suddenly* 'the thing was taken up to heaven'. Peter is greatly puzzled about what to make of this vision, when *suddenly* the men sent by Cornelius appear. As if the vision of unclean animals he's been instructed to eat (or take in), gives way to the appearance of unclean men asking him to take them in.

³ Alison, *The difference Jesus makes*, p.318.

⁴ Alison, *The difference Jesus makes*, p.318.

So notice, what's being set up here. 'According to the Holiness Code, by which the people of Israel were set apart from other nations' and by the keeping of which *their* holiness was maintained, eating the animals in Peter's vision was forbidden. As a good Jew, it would never have entered his head to transgress this commandment. Yet, the voice assures him that God has cleansed these things, so he must not call them unclean. 'In other words', Alison says, 'he is being told to overcome his repugnance at what is being shown him. And this happens three times'.⁵

Now of course, 'this is not the first time Peter has experienced something in batches of three'.⁶ Remember his three-fold denial of Jesus in the high priest's courtyard? On that occasion, Peter had been unable to overcome his fear of being on the wrong side of religious authority and shamed in front of his peers. So here's a fascinating detail. In Luke's version of this gospel story, after he's denied Jesus for the third time, 'the cock crows, or in Greek calls out'. And in this passage in Acts, also written by Luke, just after Peter's third refusal concerning the unclean animals, 'Cornelius' men stand outside his gate and *call out*. The verb is the same as the one used of the cock'.⁷

'You can begin to imagine', comments Alison, 'something of Peter's perplexity'.⁸ It's as if he's being taken back to his three-fold refusal or denial of Jesus. By now he knows that *that* refusal was a terrible mistake, a total misreading of where and how God was acting in the world. Could it be that his current certainty about what purity consists of is similarly some kind of misreading? Till now, Peter has assumed his goodness was importantly connected to his observance of the Purity Code, which offers clear instruction about who's in and who's out, and what's required to ensure you remain 'in'. But now he's beginning to glimpse that this is precisely the mentality that had led him to deny Jesus when he was made to be 'out', when he was condemned to the place of shame. And so, confronted with the

⁵ Alison, *The difference Jesus makes*, pp.320-321.

⁶ Alison, *The difference Jesus makes*, p.321.

⁷ Alison, *The difference Jesus makes*, p.321.

⁸ Alison, *The difference Jesus makes*, p.321.

Gentiles at his gate, Peter finds himself able to respond in a surprising new way: he ‘invited them in and gave them lodging’ and the next day went with them to Caesarea.

What’s beautiful about this story is that neither Cornelius nor Peter has any idea of where it’s heading. Cornelius has sent for Peter because he was told to, but without knowing what for. Peter goes because he was directed to, but without knowing why. Attentive and responsive to the Spirit, they’re both willing to be vulnerable to unknowing and available for encounter. And as they share with each other how they come to be in this surprising conversation, as they share their experiences of divine prompting, they begin to realise that they are equally on the inside of something radical and new, something that’s not *their* initiative but God’s and connected to the boundless forgiveness of the crucified and risen Jesus.⁹ For as Peter starts to tell that story, ‘while he was still speaking’ (Acts 10.44), the Holy Spirit falls on his hearers.

If the book of Acts is about the messy, human process of learning more fully the meaning of Christ, what are the disciples being shown here? At one level, it’s about the universality of the gospel; news of Jesus is relevant not only to the children of Israel but to the rest of humankind as well. But underpinning this is an even deeper learning – a seismic shift in religious understanding. What they are being shown is that holiness is not what either Peter or Cornelius thought it was. Holiness is not defining your goodness in relation to what you exclude or who you make wrong; the sacred is not defined with reference to the profane. Rather holiness is nothing more nor less than a radical openness and obedience to the Spirit of the living God. And this Spirit is always leading us beyond the categories of goodness we humans construct and weaponise, into the vulnerability of live encounter with God and with the other.

This is surprisingly difficult news to accept. We might wonder about those apostles and believers in Jerusalem who were so critical of Peter. What was their

⁹ See Alison, *The difference Jesus makes*, p.327.

problem? Why weren't they just happy at the general rejoicing? Well, their problem is that if being a circumcised law-abiding Jew turns out to be largely irrelevant to God, not definitive of goodness and belonging, that's a pretty major challenge to their sense of identity. If Peter is right, if these unclean Gentiles are called to be as much on the inside of the new story as they are, then that puts a whole lot of their history in a new and uncomfortable light. They might be remembering all the effort they'd put into being good; or incipiently regretting all the ways they'd believed themselves morally superior, inflicting damage to others in the process. No wonder they're discombobulated, sceptical, put out. Like the white, middle-class southern woman in Flannery O'Connor's short story, 'Revelation', who has a disturbing and unwelcome vision of the Last Judgement in which she sees the souls of people she despises, 'companies of white-trash', 'bands of black niggers' and 'battalions of freaks and lunatics' ascending to heaven ahead of her.

But Peter's testimony to the apostles is compelling. 'If ... 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'. And then, remarkably, they had the grace, the generosity, to relinquish their insider status and offer their wondering praise, as they embarked on the socially, religiously, morally uncharted waters where 'God has given even to the Gentiles the repentance that leads to life' (Acts 11.18).