

This is week sixteen in our journey through Acts, which itself is a recounting of the way the Holy Spirit empowered the early church to do amazing things for God. Today's theme is the Power to Change. There are three headings I will work through in my message; some things never change; some things must change and then finally some things should never change.

### **First, some things never change.**

Children will always say the most embarrassing things.

Some primary school children had been photographed for a class photo, and the teacher was pointing out they should look after it. 'Just think how nice it will be to look at it when you are all grown up and say, 'There's Jennifer, she's a lawyer,' or 'That's Michael, He's a doctor.'

A small voice at the back of the room rang out, 'And there's the teacher, she's dead.'

Some things never change, for example, men, I am sad to say, will always say the dumbest things.

A husband and wife were getting ready for bed. The wife was standing in front of a full length mirror taking a hard look at herself. 'You know, dear,' she said, 'I look in the mirror and I see an old woman. My face is all wrinkled; everything else is either sagging or bloated. I've got fat legs, and my arms are all flabby.' She turned to her husband and said, 'Tell me something positive to make me feel better about myself.'

He reflected for a moment and then said in a soft, thoughtful voice, 'Well, there's nothing wrong with your eyesight.'

Some things never change, even in church.

I read a letter this week that reminded me of emails and letters I very occasionally receive:

*I am no music scholar, but I feel I know appropriate church music when I hear it. Last Sunday's new hymn – if you can call it that – sounded like a sentimental love ballad one would expect to hear crooned in a bar. If you insist on exposing us to rubbish like this – in God's house! – don't be surprised if many of the faithful look for a new place to worship. The hymns we grew up with are all we need.*

Sound familiar? Want to add your signature? This was a letter written to a Pastor in the year 1863. The song referred to as rubbish is the hymn, 'Just as I am!'

Some things never change. But some things must change.

### **Some things must change.**

Change is a part of life. Change is inevitable. Two and a half thousand years ago a Greek Philosopher said that nothing endures but change. Change is part of the growth process that is at the heart of life as God designed it. A person who has not changed is a person who has not grown.

Change may be inevitable, but is also scary. It upsets our equilibrium; it challenges our long cherished views, even our deeply held convictions. Because change can be frightening, some of us avoid change or even resist it. Other can change. I am not.

Broadly speaking, depending on both our personality and our history, we are either a person who embraces change or is suspicious of it. And as we get older, change can become even more uncomfortable. One person put it this way:

*Middle age is when your broad mind and narrow waist begin to change places. (Joseph Cossman)*

Whether we are change embracers or change resisters, we cannot escape the fact that change is at the heart of the gospel. Every Sunday we gather we celebrate the resurrection of Jesus – that death has been swallowed up in victory and that with that victory the process of renewing the creation has begun and will be consummated when Jesus returns. On a personal level we sing songs that celebrate the change we experience through faith. Change, renewal and conversion- this is the heart of the gospel.

Today's passage recounts one of the most radical and far-reaching changes of mind in Christianity. Let's jump in to Acts, chapter 10.

Caesarea by the Sea was a magnificent port city build by Herod the Great. I had the privilege of visiting the ruins earlier this year. In Jesus' day Caesarea was occupied by a Roman garrison, of which Cornelius was a commander of a company of 100 men. Luke tells us:

(Cornelius) and all his family were devout and God-fearing; he gave generously to those in need and prayed to God regularly. (Acts 10:2)

Cornelius was a gentile, a non-Jew, who it appears had embraced the radical notion that there was only one God, rather than many and who was observing much of the moral code at the heart of Judaism. But he was not a Jew; he had not been circumcised.

One day during afternoon prayers Cornelius has a dream which terrifies him. An angel tells him to send men south to Joppa to fetch Peter and bring him back to Caesarea. He obeys the angel and sends the men.

The next day, when Cornelius' men had almost reached Joppa, Peter was on the roof of the house where he was staying. He was hungry and while praying he fell into a trance and he had a dream about food.

Peter's stomach was growling and his mind began to wander. Nothing strange there; we often dream of the things we crave when we sleep. The unusual part of Peter's dream was the food that was in it:

Peter saw heaven opened and something like a large sheet being let down to earth by its four corners. It contained all kinds of four-footed animals, as well as reptiles of the earth and birds of the air. Then a voice told him, 'Get up Peter. Kill and eat.' (Acts 10:11-13)

What for you would be the worst meal possible? What food, even if you were desperately hungry, would you struggle to eat? In our house we have one child who refuses to eat meat and another child who pretty much refuses to eat most vegetables. It makes for an interesting menu!

For an orthodox Jew like Peter his vision was no dream, it was a nightmare – like a vision from a horror movie. The sheet he saw was filled with a mixture of clean and unclean food. Jews did not eat unclean food, or even food that at come into contact with unclean food. But a voice that he intuitively knows is the voice of God instructs him to kill and eat. In his dream he protests, perhaps believing that God is trying to test him. But God challenges him:

Do not call anything impure that God has made clean. (Acts 10:15b)

The vision is repeated three times, which seems to be a pattern repeated in Peter's life. Three times he denied Jesus. Three times the resurrected Jesus asks Peter if he loves him. And now three times Peter has the same strange, perplexing dream.

While he is still wondering what it all means, Cornelius's servant knock on the door, tell Peter about Cornelius's vision and invite him north to Caesarea.

It's a strange request, but on the back of his strange dream, Peter accepts. He knows God is up to something. Peter has learned that to keep in step with the Holy Spirit he needs to expect the unexpected. I wonder if some of us dismiss dreams we have or little coincidences in our life that are God's Spirit whispering to our hearts. Last week two people independently emailed me bible verses that felt prompted to share with me. At the time I thought, 'That's nice.' It was only two days later that I connected the two verses to hear God's voice speaking to me in a way that reshaped my message last Sunday morning. I have shared before that perhaps the most dangerous words we can pray are, 'Speak Lord, for your servant is listening.'

Let's move on. The next day Peter walks the two-day, thirty mile journey north. He arrives in Caesarea and finds that Cornelius has called together all his close friends and relatives who are now waiting expectantly. Peter walks into the room and says:

You are well aware 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...May I ask why you have sent for me? (Acts 10:28, 29b)

Peter gets it, but not quite all of it. You see God has established a divine appointment between Cornelius and Peter. Cornelius responds to Peter's question by recounting his own angelic vision instructing him to fetch Peter. He goes on to say:

Now we are all here in the presence of God to listen to everything the Lord has commanded you to tell us. (Acts 10:33b)

All the pieces fall into place now; the scales fall from Peter's eyes. He says to all who are gathered:

I now realize how true it is that God does not show favouritism but accepts men from every nation who fear him and do what is right. (Acts 10:34)

Peter then does what any good preacher does when they have a captive audience; he preaches! Importantly Peter preaches the same content to Gentiles as he has to Jewish audiences before – the life, death and resurrection of Jesus and all it means. Before Peter had finished his sermon, before the altar call, before the response time, before they sang just one more verse of Just as I Am, God interrupts again:

While Peter was still speaking these words, the Holy Spirit came on all who heard the message. The circumcised believers who had come with Peter were astonished that the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on the Gentiles. For they heard them speaking in tongues and praising God. (Acts 10:44-46)

The sermon wasn't over and revival had broken out! Don't you love it?!

Peter decides that since the Gentiles believers had been baptized in the Holy Spirit, baptism with water and in the name of Jesus Christ would not be a bad idea. If God had accepted these Gentiles as his children, how could the Jewish Christians not accept them as their new brothers and sisters?

This is a wonderful story. Only in God's economy are two more unlikely paths likely to cross – Peter an orthodox Jew and Cornelius a Roman centurion. There are two conversions; it is not just Cornelius that undergoes a conversion experience, but in many ways Peter also himself.

It is hard for us to understand two thousand years later the level of suspicion that Jews then had towards non-Jews. But after centuries of occupation and oppression – the Assyrians, Babylonians, Persians, Greeks and the Romans – Israel was

antagonistic towards other nations and races. This understandable antagonism was reflected in the Jewish traditions that had developed after centuries of exile and occupation. For example, one of many teachings stated:

*Keep yourself separate from the gentiles (nations), and do not eat with them; and do not imitate their rituals, nor associate with them. (Jubilees 22:16)*

Jews who took their faith seriously would never eat with a non-Jew, enter their house or have any direct contact with them if at all possible. This was the tradition that had developed, which Peter was immersed in, and which God was now challenging.

It was a tradition that distorted God's commitment to Israel as God's chosen people and now made them God's favourite people, which was never God's intention. In forming Israel, God blessed a chosen people to be a blessing to all nations. God said to Abraham:

I will make you into a great nation and I will bless you...and all the peoples on earth will be blessed through you.  
(Genesis 12:2, 3)

It's hard to bless someone when you won't even eat with them.

Blessed to be a blessing, the Jews are God's chosen people; but God does not play favourites.

And God was not playing favourites in the church. Jesus' commission was to go into all the nations. His promise was that the church would be his witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea, and Samaria and to the ends of the world.

Peter's dream and then visit to Cornelius's house where he sees Gentile believers experience their own Pentecost forced him to re-evaluate his understanding of God and His purposes with the world. God was messing with both his head and his theology. Isn't that just like God!

Last week I shared John Wesley's framework for how we form our theology, our understanding of God. In summary, we form our understanding of God as we read the Bible, the Scriptures, through the lenses of tradition, reason and experience. But always, the Bible is our primary source for our understanding about God. It is through the witness of the Bible we discover Jesus Christ, and through him, the fullness of truth that sets us free.

Problems begin when we elevate one or more of tradition, experience or reason above scripture. Such an elevation can easily distort our picture of God. And that is what had happened in Peter's day. The tradition that had evolved over many centuries that treated non-Jews with suspicion, even hostility, blinded people to the clear teaching in the Old Testament scriptures that Israel was blessed to bless all the nations, that God's house was to be a house of prayer for all the nations and that the stranger and the alien were to always be offered hospitality.

While God's truth is always and forever true, our appreciation and understanding of it should change deepen with time.

*Truth is eternal, knowledge is changeable. It is disastrous to confuse them. (Madeleine L'Engle)*

While God's truth is infinite and unchangeable, our grasp – our knowledge- of it is finite and changeable. Sometimes, as he did with Peter, God shakes us out of our complacency with an experience that grabs our attentions and forces us to re-evaluate long held convictions in order that we might see and experience God's truth more clearly.

For God's sake, some things must change – most especially our knowledge of Truth.

The barbaric conditions of colonial slavery led William Wilberforce to confront the church with its distorted interpretation of the Bible's teaching on slavery.

In recent times, endemic poverty in a world where there is more than enough food for everybody has forced evangelical Christians to re-evaluate the Bible's teaching on the poor and the church's responsibility to seek the salvation of the whole person. These are just two examples of many.

But it gets even more personal than that. My mum and dad are staying with us at the moment. I can vividly remember an experience my dad had that forced him to re-evaluate and then change some strongly held convictions. Dad is going to share about that now. Please welcome him.

### **Interview with Dad**

Some things must change. We are very good at cocooning ourselves from experiencing God's truth. Where is God calling you to re-evaluate your understanding and experience of Him?

Perhaps there is deep-seated suspicion you have of the Holy Spirit that holds you back from experiencing the fullness of God that He offers all of us? We have elevated our prejudice to the point it blocks us from receiving the free, gracious gift of God for all his children.

Perhaps a crushing experience of God's apparent absence has led to a vow you will never ask anything of consequence of God again? We have elevated our experience, or lack of it, above raw obedience God's command to ask, to seek, to knock.

Perhaps you have clung doggedly to a doctrine, and interpretation of scripture that you sense God is calling you to prayerfully re-examine? We have stubbornly clung to our convictions without allowing God to convict us.

Some things never change and some things must change.

### **And finally, some things never change.**

There is a lie that is pervasive in our culture that says all truth is relative. In its most primitive form, this lie states that you have your 'truth', I have my 'truth' and as long as we don't hurt anybody, or, God forbid, try too hard to convince others of our particular truth, then we can all live together happily ever after.

This is a particularly convenient understanding of truth as it allows us to design our own values and beliefs according to our own personal preferences. This in turn leads to moral relativism, where there are no moral absolutes, no commonly held boundaries or understanding of what is right and wrong. And the fruit of that vine is chaos in families and in society.

'As long as we don't hurt anybody it's ok' is one of the most destructive lies in our culture. It makes no sense. You see if we are all living according to our version of the truth, as if there are no absolutes, someone, somewhere is always going to get hurt.

Truth, God's truth, is unchangeable. Catholic novelist Flannery O'Connor put it far better than me.

*The truth does not change according to our ability to stomach it. (Flannery O'Connor)*

We should always state our understanding and knowledge of God's truth with humility. The church, to its great shame, has not always done this. But while we should express God's truth humbly, we should also do so confidently with a confidence not based on our intelligence, but on confidence in God's Word. Let me illustrate briefly.

Over the last five decades there has been a sexual revolution in the western world. Most couples live together before they marry, if they choose to marry at all. Sexual intimacy outside the covenant of marriage is now 'normal' in that most couples are sexually active long before their wedding day.

This reality, this 'experience' of the 21<sup>st</sup> century world has led some in the church to state we need to move with the times, that we need to discard antiquated views about sex and marriage, in the same way we have discarded other convictions of the past. But here is the thing.

Experience is a wonderful servant when it comes to our knowledge of truth, but it is a terrible master.

Experience can force us to re-evaluate and reconsider deeply held convictions. Experience can force us back to a closer examination of the Bible and what it has to say on a particular issue. But experience is always the servant; scripture and its articulation of God's truth is the master.

And so with sex and marriage, when I prayerfully re-examine the Bible in light of modern attitudes I still come away with the long held conviction that sexual intimacy is God's gift for the covenant relationship of marriage. This is why as a church we have a clearly articulated policy that is summarized by the statement 'celibacy in singleness and faithfulness in marriage.'

The pressure to shift from truth to relativism will sometime be enormous, but the result of such a shift would be tragic. One hundred years ago GK Chesterton put it this way:

*We do not want, as the newspapers say, a **church that will** move with the world. We want a **church that will move the world.** (G.K. Chesterton)*

One thing never changes – Gods' Truth. Peter's revelation that God shows no favouritism was not new 'truth'. This was not God changing God's mind. This truth was always true from the foundation of time. But the truth of God's grace for all was buried under centuries of tradition and was subsequently uncovered by the Holy Spirit inspired dream of Peter and vision of Cornelius.

In the end our church, Newlife Uniting, is not regulated by the Elders or the Ministry staff, but by God's truth as it is revealed in the Bible. This is why one of the eight foundational values of our church is Scriptural Discernment.

*Centering our lives on God's written Word we will allow scripture and the Holy Spirit to guide and direct us as we encounter God's living Word (Christ).*

We do not worship this book; we worship the One it proclaims. As we worship Christ we allow our minds to be renewed by the Holy Spirit as we are led deeper into the truth that sets us free.