

Acts 11:1-18

Well, good morning. We are going through unprecedented times. With social distancing and lock-down it is a time of struggle for most of us. And during these strange times we have had to re-evaluate our understanding of church. We were quite happily going on meeting at church on Sunday mornings but now we can't – well not physically – and who knows how long it will be before we can meet again in our All Saints Church building?

So, we have to re-evaluate.... what is church?

What are the things we absolutely have to be and have to do, to be church?

Well, 2000 years ago the church in Jerusalem may not have been in lockdown, but our reading from Acts 11 indicates that they too were having to re-evaluate. They had to take stock and seriously review what their new-found church was all about.

I never cease to be amazed how relevant the Bible is today and how much God speaks through it into today's situations.

So, what is church?

May we pray.....

Our reading starts as Peter goes up to see the mother church in Jerusalem... Following the stoning of Steven, much of the church, that was regularly meeting in Jerusalem was scattered throughout Judea and Samaria. But when reports were heard that the Gentiles had received the word of God, Peter, the rock, the founding member of the church of Christ had gone to investigate and was now reporting back.

And Peter told them, that their current understanding of church was far too narrow.....

Peter had been on a journey - not just a physical journey but a spiritual journey as well. A journey where his own understanding of church had been challenged.

We will see how Peter, the one who previously didn't listen to Jesus - when he said several years earlier - that 'nothing that enters a man from the outside makes him unclean (as recorded in Mark 7:19). The one who rebuked Jesus when he said he was going to die (that's in Mark 16) The one who denied Jesus 3 times when he was arrested.

We will see how even Peter, the Galilean fisherman who was once so entrenched in tradition and suspicious of change, now stood in front of the church in Jerusalem and challenged **them** to reconsider, to see the church in a completely new way.

As we go through this passage – and you might want to have it open to follow – we're in Acts chapter 11....Let's see what changed Peter's mind...

Verse 4 - *Starting from the beginning, Peter told them the whole story:*

Peter was in the city of Joppa, 40 miles west of Jerusalem – on the coast...hmm, JoppaOK more Brownie points on offer this morning.... to anyone who can tell me another incident recorded in the Bible that happened in Joppa?

It was eight centuries earlier a certain man boarded a ship in Joppa – intent on running away from God....his name was?....

A couple more clues for those who haven't got it yet....He was supposed to go to Nineveh... He was in the belly of a fish for 3 days.....yes of course it was– Jonah

But this occasion in Joppa, Peter was not running away, Peter was praying...

There has been a lot of praying going on in this church in the last 6 weeks. The one thing lock-down has enabled us to have.... is time.... and many people have come together virtually, every evening at 9pm to pray. I thank God that Linda Fiddymment stood up on our very last service we had altogether in All Saint's church and suggested we do this. Suggested that we come together each evening at 9pm and pray. If that wasn't a God incident, I don't what is! God prompting, Linda listening and speaking out in faith.

So Peter was praying...And As he prayed he had a vision..... It says he was in a trance, God enabling a state of mind where Peter could receive from God..

Peter was not asleep, this was not a dream, this was a vision, a picture from God.

Have you ever had a picture from God, or a picture while you pray which you think may be from God? It's not always easy to tell. But these are precious. Please record them, draw them, write them down and share them with someone you trust. Just a note of caution....if they're frightening, scary, negative, if they seem to be condemning – then they're not from God.

If you are not one for seeing pictures, you could ask.... you may be surprised. I always thought, pictures from God had to be coloured images – you close your eyes and you see an image... and so told myself I don't receive picture from God – but I kept asking and from time to time I get impressions of picture...I don't know if that makes any sense –say, for instance – if I 'see' a ship – I may not see a picture of a ship but I think of a ship...does that make sense?

You know when someone tells you – whatever you do don't think about a pink elephant....some may see and some may just capture it in their imagination....

So however God communicates to you – in thoughts, words, pictures, or by internal prompting – do leave space in your prayers to allow God to speak.

Clearly God speaks through scripture, through nature, through many other ways, but here in our passage we see God giving Peter a vision....

He saw something like a large sheet being let down from heaven filled with what, to Peter, would be unclean animals. And having received the vision God spoke to him telling him to eat them...

Peter was praying, he saw a vision and heard from God..but initially...he didn't believe what God was saying... verse 8 says

⁸, 'Surely not, Lord! Nothing impure or unclean has ever entered my mouth.'

Dear Peter.... questioning God! And what a great irony.... Peter calling God, Lord, yet refusing to believe what he said.

But God, who, thankfully, has extraordinary patience, showed Peter 3 times, 3 times to make sure he got it...

Oh, how well God knows Peter!–

And how well God knows us too – I don't know about you, but for me...it is so easy to ignore God's voice and write it off as a coincidence, or maybe just our own thoughts – it can be hard to believe that the God who made the Universe wants to speak to little old me...do you feel that? I don't feel worthy enough. I'm not holy enough, I'm not good enough. But friends none of us are, and that's the point. Jesus came, he died to take our sins and he rose again – why? So we can have a relationship with God. We have been put right with God by the blood of Jesus – amen!

So God speaks to us, and fortunately, God usually reinforces His message. Sometimes he'll give the same message over several days, or weeks or months. Sometimes other people will have a similar message, and as you share with others, it seems that God is saying the same thing in lots of different ways through different people, and sometimes through different channels.

And I believe we have seen that powerfully with the prayer circle.

The words **God is doing a new thing** have been repeated time and time again...And we see that, don't we as He is growing his kingdom here in Chatham in a new way. Let's not pass this off as coincidence, let's not lose hope when things get tough. God is at work.

I buried my wonderful mum last week – she died as a result of this wretched Coronavirus. Each one of us has been affected in different ways. But, let's hold on to the hope that God is with us, and he **is** doing a new thing.

Andrea brought us Psalm 91 back in March –the words '*you will find refuge under his wing*' have been echoed so many times, by many different people....

But God doesn't give us messages just to make us feel better, sometimes he will give us that wonderful sense of peace, or an overwhelming sense of love but specific repeating words from God are usually for others....

We read on in our passage – verses 11 that

¹¹ "Right then three men who had been sent to Peter from Caesarea stopped at the house where he was staying.

And Peter, who had listened to God was now was listening to the Spirit's prompting. and he **went** with these men.... without hesitation... he went to *the house of uncircumcised men and ate with them*- something the old Peter would never have done.

.....And I love the way he took 6 witnesses with him.

He was going into uncharted territory, but he wasn't going to somewhere where God hadn't already been at work.....

He was going somewhere God was very much already at work.

An angel had appeared to the household of Cornelius – wow – an angel....

I wonder what that looked like? Some people think that angels are just humans that God uses for his purposes But the Bible says a lot about angels, spiritual beings that are part of God's creation.

Psalm 8 finds David musing – what is man that God is mindful of us...he made us a little less than the angels. Angels are mentioned 112 times in the OT and 184 times in the New. When Jesus was arrested in Gethsemane when one of his disciples had chopped off a soldier's ear he said – as recorded in Matthew 26:53 – Do you think I cannot call on my father and he will at once put at my disposal more than 12 legions of angels? (if a legion is 6000 then 12 legions is.....a lot...)

248 times in the Bible there is mention of God Almighty (the Greek word is *tsaba* which means host or company or army)... – and that word Almighty is translated in the King James bible as Lord of Hosts The message translates that as–the Lord of the Angel Army, as that is what he is.... God has a multitude of angels at his disposal. (Check out the fall of Jericho in Joshua 5:14)

Several people in our fellowship have been given words about Angels. Be assured God is mighty and God does and will continue to send angels...to both protect and to speak...

Back to Acts 11 v 14 – it is interesting that the angel who appeared to the Cornelius household, didn't share the Gospel - that was left for Peter to do.

The angel speaks clearly that *Peter, will bring a message – he will bring them a message, Peter will tell them about Jesus and through that message, **all** the household will be saved.'*

Peter needed to be challenged about his practices and prejudices...Peter needed to learn that, not only should he not call any **food** impure or unclean, but also, he should not call any **person** impure or unclean...

And that's a challenge for us too, what are our prejudices? What is my prejudice? What is stopping us from sharing the gospel with others – even in this time – or may be especially in the time of national crisis?

These are times of great opportunity. Time to take a risk for the Gospel...

You see, the gospel saves, God saves, Jesus saves....We are called to bring the message of hope, the message of peace, the message of love, the message of eternal life.

And, here's a thing...don't worry about what you say.....

It says in verse 15

As Peter began to speak – not once Peter had given the whole story and taken the household through Genesis, Exodus, ,Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy – all the way through the bible pointing out how God always promised a Messiah and then about the life death and resurrection and how Jesus took our sins, and has justified us before God and we are going through a process of sanctification... no

¹⁵ *"As Peter **began** to speak, the **Holy Spirit** came on them, just as he had come on the disciples on that very first Pentecost..*

The Holy Spirit simply fell on them while the astonished Joppa Christians looked on in wonder....

We just need to start to speakand let God be God. Let God, who can do immeasurably more than we can think or imagine, do what he does best – transform lives by his Holy Spirit.

So, Peter had a vision which changed the whole course of the early church....

Peter prayed,

Peter overcame his prejudices "Surely not Lord",

Peter listened– he really listened. He listened to the Lord, He listened to the Holy Spirit, he listened to the men who had seen an angel.

Finally, Peter didn't hesitate and opened his mouth and he spoke

And in doing this... in praying, repenting, listening and speaking, Peter witnessed an extraordinary event that changed the whole direction of the church.

And the church back in Jerusalem were convinced that they needed to change and adapt too.

Peter knew, that he could not stand in the way of God's purposes and the church accepted his evidence they praised God for the power of the gospel.

My friends we have a mighty God, the commander of a powerful angel army a God who is fighting for us and goes ahead of us.

We have a mighty Lord, in Jesus – who, through his death on the cross took our sins and dealt with them. Then, he rose again, thereby defeating death and defeating the evil one and opening up a way for all to be saved.

And friends we have a mighty Holy Spirit – who lives in us, in those who believe, and he prompts us, gives us pictures, speaks to us, guides us... and is with us as we do God's will.

So, our responsibility in these days....

Firstly....Pray, pray, pray....

Secondly, We ask God to forgive us ...we Turn away from our prejudices– turn away from those things that are getting in the way of our relationship with God and turn back to Him, turn turn turn.

Thirdly...we need to listen. Listen, spend time listening – and write down what you think God is saying or showing you. Is God calling you to someone particularly? Let's open our minds to new possibilities.

Finally – we open our mouths and speak –... ...share stories of how Jesus makes a difference in our lives...it doesn't need to be long or eloquent, just begin...share the love of Christ and the hope He brings. And let God do the rest....

'See, I am doing a new thing', says the Lord – What will our church look like at the end of this lock-down? We may be surprised.

Let's pray, repent, listen, and speak.

Amen...