

Universal grace

Sunday 6 May 2018

Introduction

Lord Jesus, giver of light and grace, fill us with the generosity of spirit to give all we have to your praise and glory. Amen

When I was just starting out lecturing, with all the naïve confidence, ignorance and impetuosity of a 26 yr old my boss took me to one side and said, remember James it is much easier to be forgiven than to get permission. Bernard has a great deal to answer for as I have pretty much lived by that maxim ever since. When I read passages like the one we heard just now from Acts, I am always reminded of that advice. The impression I get from Acts (and this probably says as much about me as it does about the early Church) is that the apostles and early disciples were constantly trying to walk a tightrope between being adventurous, pioneering and risk-taking on the one hand and yet appearing to conform and do what was approved. The problem of course was that at that time the rule book had yet to be written. There was very little agreement about what orthodoxy really was. As we read both in Acts and in many of Paul's letters, there were major disagreements between different communities about what how to live, how to behave and what to preach.

In that sense, this story of Peter going up to Jerusalem to explain himself is entirely typical. It's almost as if Peter is being summoned to the headmaster's study, except of course there is no one headmaster and Peter is arguably one of the most senior pupils if not head boy! Even with his aura of authority and,

one imagines, the sense that he was one of the most influential disciples – Peter the rock - , even with that status, Peter was still called to explain to the others what he has been up to. Remember that one of the reasons that Jesus himself fell foul of the authorities was because he was teaching against the majority. So even Peter was not able to go it alone, without being called to account by others.

Consequently when word reaches Jerusalem that Peter has been seen eating with gentiles, he has to go and explain why. At this stage in the development of the church there was still a real division between the Jewish Christians, who although they recognised Jesus as Lord and Messiah still persisted in thinking that salvation was for ‘the circumcised’ and the others. As this story makes clear, there were many if not all in Jerusalem who had this perception that only they had repentance that leads to eternal life (to quote v 18). Often Paul is regarded as the apostle to the Gentiles, with peter perceived as apostle to the Jews, and so in some way there was tension between them. Certainly there were disagreements, sometimes quite bitter, between Peter and Paul, but this episode certainly highlights Peter’s conviction that God’s grace and salvation is for all people.

And, as such, this story is a significant turning point in the life of the early church in Jerusalem. Clearly the current perception was that God’s grace was restricted to Jewish Christians and therefore Peter’s actions were unacceptable. And there was no greater charge than being ‘unclean’ as Peter himself recognises in v8 ‘nothing unclean or impure has ever entered my mouth.’

But as the next verse emphasises, that understanding of what is clean or unclean is completely mistaken. You need to bear in mind that, particularly for

Jewish Christians, the Torah, the 'law', had given very strict instructions about how to live a godly life. Leviticus in particular is very explicit about what to eat and what not to eat. The juxtaposition of clean and unclean was a pretty fundamental part of all teaching. Peter's vision completely overturns that version of the truth. What they had been thinking of as unclean is part of God's creation, and so verse 9: 'do not call anything impure that God has made clean.' And to emphasise the point Peter says that the voice repeated this three times. And we all know how significant three times is for Peter!

This vision convinces Peter that he has been wrong all along. His understanding of pure and impure, the way that he has been interacting with gentiles is completely mistaken. His understanding of God's purpose was too limited, too restricted, too narrow. The idea that God's grace, Jesus's saving power, was in some sense reserved for Jewish Christians only is shown to be fundamentally flawed.

At the time, for those early Christian communities, this is a really big deal. The question of who could be part of God's plan was a very significant matter of debate. Who are we, who can be 'one of us' was a hotly contested subject as the letters of the early church make clear. What is apparent from this passage, though is that at least for that moment, the question was definitely resolved. The Jewish Christians, having heard Peter's explanation and vision, 'had no further objections and praised God saying 'even to the Gentiles, God has granted repentance that leads to life'. So acceptance, even approval for what Peter had done, but the words they are said to have used give an indication of how grudging (and perhaps how temporary) that acceptance was – 'even to the Gentiles'! You might have thought that this would be the end of the

matter, but as you read the later letters of the early church and their leaders, it is quite clear that this particular lesson was never entirely settled.

But before we become too sanctimonious, or self-righteous like the Pharisee with the scribe, I'm very much afraid that the church over the centuries has failed and still fails to understand the clear message in this story of the universality of God's grace.

What is it about human nature that means so often we want that which is ours to be ours and not someone else's. When I was studying I spent time with friends who had a four year old son Patrick. Patrick's father, Laurence, was like me studying for a theology PhD and they were a very Christian family. One afternoon Patrick asked his father, after he had been playing with Nicky, one of their neighbour's daughters, Daddy is God in Nicky? Laurence replied, yes of course. To which Patrick immediately retorted, but I don't want that, if God is in me, how can he be in Nicky as well?... Out of the mouths of babes and children.

How many times do we exhibit this limited, restricting, exclusivist approach? A different accent, a different colour, a different gender, a different political view, a different sexual orientation – how often are these differences used as a reason for excluding people, for treating them differently from those who are 'in' our group? How many barriers do we construct to keep our community, our world, our view of reality safe, protected ours, so that others are kept outside. Almost everywhere you look, in the papers, on tv, in music never mind in political speeches, or (I'm afraid to say) in sermons, we seem to want to be very clear that some people don't belong, are not part, can never participate in 'our' community – whatever our might mean.

But this version of the truth, though probably an elemental part of human nature, is clearly at odds with Jesus' message to us. God's grace, God's salvation, God's kingdom are for all people, no matter what accent, colour, race, gender, political view of sexual orientation. What God offers freely, universally is available to all people. God does not exclude anyone from his saving plan, people can only exclude themselves.

This gratuitous love is not limited in the way that we might try to limit it. We are the ones who construct barriers, high walls around us. But this is as flawed and fruitless as the Jews attempt to build walls around the Torah to keep the people safe from what those leaders in the immediate aftermath of the Exile regarded as contamination from other peoples. They thought the only way to keep God's word, was to keep it pure, to keep it from others, to keep it for themselves.

Sadly, I'm afraid two thousand or more years later, we are still making the same mistakes. We have not learned from Jesus' example, we still fail to live by Jesus' commandment we heard earlier from John's gospel – v 34: A new command I give you: love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another.

I don't read anywhere a 'so long as they are ..., provided they do, ... only if they behave as ...'. No, Jesus is quite clear we must love one another as he loved us – sinners, tax collectors, prostitutes, homeless people, 'unclean' people – these are our brothers and sisters. But can we really say that we do love them as Jesus commands us to do?

For my own part, I can only confess, shamefully, that I fall short of this calling. Of course, as one might jokingly say, some of my best friends are tax collectors,

homeless people etc. but I think we might all deep down admit that we know this is not really so. Discipleship is hard, really hard, very challenging, disconcerting and uncomfortable, and as we know the rewards are out of this world...

However, although we might fail and fail again, we must keep trying. We must remember that God knows us, God loves us and God calls us. We are not doing this alone – the Holy Spirit, the Comforter (God's special helper as the children's bible so wonderfully puts it) is alongside us, accompanying us along the way. So let's listen to His Spirit, let's be reassured by His love, let's believe, really believe, God's grace for us all, every single one of us on this planet, now and in years to come.

So I pray:

Heavenly Father, your love knows no limits, your grace has no barriers, your kingdom has no end. Fill us with your life-giving spirit that we might live according to your will, follow your way, and show that love so all might know that we are your disciples, today and always. Amen.