

Open minds; open hearts

John 13 : 33 -35

Jesus said: ³³ "My children, I will be with you only a little longer. You will look for me, and just as I told the Jews, so I tell you now: where I am going, you cannot come. ³⁴ A new command I give you : love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. ³⁵ By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another."

from Acts 10

About noon..., Peter went up on the roof to pray. ¹⁰ He became hungry and wanted something to eat, and while the meal was being prepared, he fell into a trance. ¹¹ He saw heaven opened and something like a large sheet being let down to earth by its four corners. ¹² It contained all kinds of four-footed animals, as well as reptiles and birds. ¹³ Then a voice told him, "Get up, Peter. Kill and eat."

¹⁴ "Surely not, Lord!" Peter replied. "I have never eaten anything impure or unclean."

¹⁵ The voice spoke to him a second time, "Do not call anything impure that God has made clean."

¹⁶ This happened three times, and immediately the sheet was taken back to heaven.

¹⁹ While Peter was still thinking about the vision, the Spirit said to him, "Simon, three men are looking for you. ²⁰ So get up and go downstairs. Do not hesitate to go with them, for I have sent them."

²¹ Peter went down and said to the men, "I'm the one you're looking for. Why have you come?"

²² The men replied, "We have come from Cornelius the centurion. He is a righteous and God-fearing man, who is respected by all the Jewish people. A holy angel told him to ask you to come to his house so that he could hear what you have to say." ²³ Then Peter invited the men into the house to be his guests.

The next day Peter started out with them, and some of the believers from Joppa went along. ²⁴ The following day he arrived in Caesarea. Cornelius was expecting them and had called together his relatives and close friends. ²⁵ As Peter entered the house, Cornelius met him and fell at his feet in reverence.

²⁶ But Peter made him get up. "Stand up," he said, "I am only human myself."

²⁷ While talking with him, Peter went inside and found a large gathering of people. ²⁸ He said to them: "You are well aware that it is against our law for a

Jew to associate with Gentiles or visit them. But God has shown me that I should not call anyone impure or unclean. ²⁹ So when I was sent for, I came without raising any objection. May I ask why you sent for me?"

³⁰ Cornelius answered: "Three days ago I was in my house praying at this hour, at three in the afternoon. Suddenly a man in shining clothes stood before me ³¹ and said, 'Cornelius, God has heard your prayer and remembered your gifts to the poor. ³² Send to Joppa for Simon who is called Peter.

Now we are all here in the presence of God to listen to everything the Lord has commanded you to tell us." ³⁴ Then Peter began to speak: "I now realize how true it is that God does not show favouritism ³⁵ but accepts those from every nation who fear him and do what is right. ³⁶ You know the message God sent to the people of Israel, announcing the good news of peace through Jesus Christ, who is Lord of all..... ³⁹ They killed him by hanging him on a cross, ⁴⁰ but God raised him from the dead on the third day and caused him to be seen. ⁴² He commanded us to preach to the people.Everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name."

⁴⁴ While Peter was still speaking these words, the Holy Spirit came on all who heard the message. ⁴⁵ The circumcised believers who had come with Peter were astonished that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on Gentiles.

It's great to be back at Peace Church again after our trip to Mexico. I'd never been to Latin America before; it was a fascinating experience ... There were things which absolutely fitted my idea of what it would be like : big cacti, big hats, 'Wild West' countryside, hot chilli peppers - and there were things that were completely new : not least in the food department !

Our first full day in Mexico City, an associate of Peter's asked us out to a restaurant – and the menu was a revelation! I actually ate cactus leaf for the first time in my life! – and I tasted *mole* – a thick paste of chilli and chocolate – (which I didn't really like) - but I just couldn't bring myself even to try the grasshoppers! The very idea of eating insects was enough to make me feel a bit queasy! Of course, to the Mexicans, cactus leaves and grasshoppers are perfectly normal foods – as normal as cabbage and pork to the Bavarians! Food is very much a matter of what you're used to, isn't it? And if there's an idea in your head that you don't eat a particular thing, it's hard to get over that!

In the Old Testament, there are long and careful lists of what the Jewish people should and shouldn't eat. Grasshoppers are actually okay (!) – so are locusts! - but things like pork and rabbit aren't.

God wanted his chosen people, the Jews, to be different. They were to worship one God only; they were to have the highest standards of honesty, sexual

morality and care for older people. And also – perhaps to remind them every day of their call to be different – they were to follow rules about food and hygiene. They had rules about worship too, like rules about making food and animal sacrifices.

When Jesus came, he taught that the rules about moral behaviour were for ever. In fact, they even apply to what we're thinking and feeling! But the rules about external things – food, hand-washing, sacrifices – all of these could be set aside. The need for honesty and respect and moral behaviour will always be there : but there was no longer any need to keep these other rules – because God's chosen people would now be anyone who follows Christ..... And they would be 'different' not because of their food or clothing or anything like that, but because they had the Holy Spirit . In the same way : Jesus' sacrifice on the cross meant that no other sacrifice to God would ever be needed. That's why when we worship, the Jewish 'altar' of sacrifice has become a table where we share bread and wine and celebrate Jesus' love. The only sacrifice that God wants from us in worship is our sacrifice of praise.

But imagine how it must have felt being a Jew 2,000 years ago, a Jew brought up in the traditional Jewish way, knowing all the rules about food and washing and sacrifices off by heart – because that was what you did – that was what everybody did... You'd never really question it, would you? It's just automatic – second nature - you've never known anything else. That's how it was for Peter.

Now Peter had been really close to Jesus – and he'd seen Jesus live like a regular Jew – go to the Jewish festivals – eat the right food at Passover... He'd also heard Jesus challenge some of the Jewish rules : the finer points of how you behave on the day of rest and whether particular ways of washing hands and plates was essential. He'd even seen Jesus push the barriers about mixing with non-Jews, that is, with Gentiles. But even so, Jesus had still spent most of his time in his own land with his own people.

Peter hadn't really had much call to think of how belief in Jesus might affect anyone who wasn't a Jew. Yes, of course, Jesus had said “Go into all the world and make people my disciples” – but there might be Jews all over the world, mightn't there...???. ..And that stuff in the scriptures about being a light to the Gentiles – the non-Jews – that could be for way in the future (?) or perhaps people would become Jews and then be able to become Christians afterwards....(?)

Peter is a mature believer in Jesus. He has the power of Jesus' Holy Spirit. He has already become a respected Christian leader. But he is also human – and as such a product of his upbringing and culture. He follows the Jewish traditions out of habit as much as anything else. It doesn't occur to him to think any different and then he has this weird vision!!!

And he has this vision 3 times. Completely identical events. Completely identical words. 3 times. That means it wasn't just that he was dozing in the midday sun and had a bizarre dream..... It must mean something.

Here's this thing – something like a large sheet – that's let down from above by its 4 corners. And in the sheet – like in a hammock – there are lots of animals and birds and reptiles.... all of them creatures that you can't eat, according to Jewish tradition. But a voice says, "Get up; kill something; eat it."

It'd be a bit like us having a dream where we were at a table full of snakes and spiders and someone says, "We're going to have a great feast – look what's on the menu!"

Peter is immediately repelled. Of course he's not going to eat any of this! It's not food! It's not something he's ever eaten – or could ever imagine eating! (*just like me and the grasshoppers!*). And so Peter says straightaway – without a second thought – "Surely not!! I've never eaten anything I shouldn't." That's the way he was brought up.

We're all to some extent or another a product of our upbringing. Perhaps it's good for us all to be forced to think about our most basic assumptions – to review those assumptions we grew up with; the values that we've always had. They may or may not fit in with what God wants for us now ...Perhaps we were brought up: not to trust people; or to value money or good health above anything else; or never to apologise; or to care about other people from our family and our town but not to worry about anyone else... God would want to challenge all of those.

And if we're parents, it's well worth thinking about those assumptions that we're passing on to our children – the things we habitually say to them about life or relationships.... "*Well, that's what men (or: women) are like...*" or "*you'll follow in my footsteps, of course*". Dangerous talk! Perhaps even more important, we need to reflect on the assumptions which govern the way we behave : the way we react to a problem, or the way we speak to people or whether we pray Our habits will shape our children's view of life and their 'automatic' responses. That doesn't mean we should all feel guilty that we're not perfect! It does mean that we need to ask God to open our eyes to what he wants to change in us..... And here's the good news! However deep childhood assumptions and habits go, however powerful they are, God can change them, if we will just be open to what he has to say.

And that's what we see now with Simon Peter. Peter hears the message 3 times : "Don't call anything impure if God has made it clean." God is telling Peter to rethink his ideas about what is acceptable and what isn't. And God then puts it in his mind to go and meet the 3 visitors that are approaching the house at that very moment. Peter goes down into the street and meets these men. And they make it clear that they are not Jews but Gentiles and that they've come from a Roman

soldier who of course is not a Jew either. And this Gentile soldier is asking Peter to visit him!! 24 hours earlier, Peter's reply would have been automatic :

So sorry, gentlemen, but as you know, it's against our rules and tradition for a Jew to have anything to do with a Gentile and we certainly don't visit them! That would be completely unacceptable ! Sorry you've wasted your time....

But Peter's old assumptions have just been challenged – head on. And with God's help, Peter has interpreted his vision aright. The old ideas about what - and who - is acceptable no longer hold. Old ideas about impurity are swept away by Jesus. The ones about food aren't necessary any more – and don't much matter anyway; the ideas about people are much more significant. The old barriers between nations have been torn down. Jesus is the only one who makes anyone clean and acceptable to God. Believing in Jesus is now open to anyone - of any nation, background or tradition. The 'chosen people' are now those who choose to follow Jesus Christ.

And so Peter makes his first unprecedented move as a Jew : he actually invites the visitors in as his guests! The next day, he gets some of the local Jewish Christians to go with him to Cornelius's house. He then takes them into this Gentile house, talks and eats with Cornelius and his family and friends - and shares the good news of Jesus - with all these Gentiles. And the Jewish Christians that Peter's had the good sense to take along see how the Gentiles respond - and then see the Holy Spirit unmistakably coming upon them.

These regular Jews are "*astonished*" to see that God is accepting Gentiles just as he's accepted them! cleansing Gentiles just as he's cleansed them! But, like Peter, they manage to get over their astonishment and their prejudices and their old assumptions – and they help to baptise the new Christians.

It's not easy : it's been a struggle. But faced with God's clear message, Peter and the others have had their minds opened to new ideas, and their hearts opened too – to new Christian brothers and sisters.

When we read all this, I guess we can hardly identify that closely with Peter. We're not Jews – we probably don't have to rethink our eating habits – and it's no surprise to us that Jesus is for everyone, Jew, Gentile, American, African, European, or whatever! But it's perfectly possible that God has a challenge for each of us today : a challenge to open our minds and open our hearts. We may need to open our minds to a new idea. We may need to open our hearts to a new person.

Think of the knee-jerk reaction Peter has in the vision : "Surely not! I've never-!" That's the response of a mind that's been closed. Are there issues like that for us? "*Surely not! I've never –*" Perhaps we've never done something that God now wants us to do. Perhaps we've taken on a view from our childhood that God wants us to re-think. And that isn't a recipe for following any new idea from anywhere... Look at how closely Peter sticks to God. That's where he's going to get his ideas from... because that's who he's thinking about. The vision comes,

after all, when he's praying. Then he thinks about the vision and so the Holy Spirit is able to put more thoughts in his mind. Peter is focused on God and so God can teach him – and use him to teach others. If we don't expect God to be teaching us anything new, then God doesn't get much of a chance to do that. But if we spend time praying, he can speak to us. If we spend time thinking things over, he can develop our ideas.

If we have open minds, then God can teach us – and even use us to teach others. If we have open hearts, then God can give us a love for other people – and even use us to help them. In fact, without openness, we can never obey Jesus' command to love one another. And we know that Jesus saw that as an absolute essential.

I may not have been able to have an open mind about eating grasshoppers in Mexico (!) but on Easter Sunday, in a Spanish-language church, we certainly encountered open hearts. We had a great welcome from those Mexican Christians. Unlike Peter, I don't have any Spanish – but that didn't matter : English, Mexican, Jewish, Gentile - we are all one in Jesus. That was the new message for Peter in his vision. Let's ask God for a new message for us as we come to his table today. Amen.

Let's pray.

Loving God, give us love one for another.

Open our hearts to care for one another.

And please, we pray, open our minds. Take away any fears we have of rethinking old ideas. May we learn from your Word and from one another. May we look to you for guidance and grow in understanding. And above all, we pray that the Holy Spirit will be at work in us, shaping our views and leading us on.

For your name's sake

Amen.
