

“A radical vision” a sermon based on Acts 11:1-18 preached by Kerry Enright at Knox Church Dunedin New Zealand on 24 April 2016.

Today’s reading in Acts 11 presents the radical dynamic of the Christian movement. Because it is so radical, so startlingly fresh, we need to keep coming back to it, to be reminded of it, to be shaped by it.

On this Anzac Eve, God presents a way of being human, as God intended humankind, a way of being that is called a church, as an antidote to war.

So let’s enter the text.

We need to go back one verse, to the end of chapter 10.

“Then the gentiles invited Peter to stay for several days.”

No big deal, you might think. But that’s not what the church of the time thought. There was a fierce reaction.

Verse 2 of chapter 11, accusingly “Why did you enter the house of uncircumcised people and eat with them?”

Jerusalem’s church leaders heard what Peter had done. They heard that non-Jewish outsiders are now insiders. And they are not happy. As Doug Bratt says, we can almost see them waiting for Peter at Jerusalem’s city gate with fire in their eyes and hands on their hips.

We might imagine they would give him a hero’s welcome, a red carpet. The Christian movement was spreading. New people had come to faith. It had reached a whole new group of people, and who knows where it might have gone from there. There was every reason to celebrate, to affirm, to encourage.

But instead the Jerusalem leaders give him a grim one sentence telling off.

“Why did you enter the house of uncircumcised people and eat with them?”

God had brought many of Peter’s Jewish friends to faith in Jesus Christ, which was fine as long as they still practised the accepted rites, including male circumcision, as long as they fitted in.

We might imagine this would not have been surprising to the followers of Jesus. Jesus often got into trouble for sharing meals with tax collectors, prostitutes and other unwashed people. However it was assumed that those marginalised people were people of the faith.

Now Peter was violating a strict taboo by eating with uncircumcised gentiles. It was fine for the gospel to be shared, but they were angry that it meant sharing the homes of this completely other group and eating with them. They were angry because they could see that the Christian movement was one that went to where people were, to engage people there, to subject itself to radical change.

So Peter needs to defend himself.

He must somehow show that the sharing of the gospel with Gentiles is God's idea, not his.

He recounts the story of his vision and his trip to the home of Cornelius.

"The Spirit told me to go with them and not to make a distinction between them and us."

One can imagine Peter would have been content to stay in Joppa, pray and take a little nap after lunch. Less trouble. Less conflict. Less agitation.

And it's not as if this way of being came easy to Peter. God took three times to get the point across, three times before Peter connected the dots. The Spirit finally convinces Peter that the Spirit's baptism embraces even Gentiles like Cornelius and his household.

Peter names what drives him and becomes a bit pointed.

"I wouldn't want to be found opposing God. But if that is what the rest of you want to do, well, go right ahead. Oppose God if you want, but as for me, I think I'll just stick with God's programme and trust God to get it right."

"If God gave them the same gift as he gave us ... what power did I have to oppose God?"

And somehow, God breaks through to the leaders in Jerusalem.

"When they heard this, they were silenced. And they praised God saying "Then God has given even to the Gentiles the repentance that leads to life."

In two weeks, Dunedin is hosting a leading Catholic scholar, Steven Bevans. I have heard him and read his material and I commend him to you. He and a colleague have written what has become a classic in understanding the spread of the gospel, the nature of the church. It makes much of the text today. So let me use what Bevans says.

Religious leaders worried they were progressively losing control, that this Jesus movement was getting out of hand, that they could not predetermine where it would go or how it would end up and who would belong.

That was a scary feeling. So they tried to stop the momentum.

The book of Acts shows how Stephen intuited that the good news of Jesus went beyond Judaism. And as a result he was killed for preaching a radical, unthinkable doctrine. Many Greek-speaking Jews had to flee the city lest they suffer the same fate.

More strange things began to happen. One of Stephen's companions, Philip, preached to Samaritans—Bevans calls them half-Jews, half-breeds—and they accepted the Lordship of Jesus and his vision of God and of the world.

Then Philip was led to preach to an Ethiopian eunuch—by law excluded from becoming a Jew— and he was moved to admit him into the Jesus fellowship.

What had started out as a movement within Judaism had become something else. The Spirit was moving the community to another place, taking Jesus' vision to where perhaps even he had not imagined it would go.

The climax came according to Acts when some unnamed men and women who had fled persecution after Stephen's execution, arrived in the great urban centre of Antioch in Syria (the third largest city in the world at the time) and preached not only to Jews, but also to Gentiles. The result was that "a great number turned to the Lord" (Acts 11:21).

And it is there the church begins and gains its identity. When it goes beyond the people who are already in, to people who are entirely different. When it crosses boundaries and borders and goes to the frontiers.

The followers began to see that in Jesus something new had begun, that God's mission in the world—begun in the Spirit from the first moment of creation and continued concretely in Jesus—had been handed over to them. And now they were called to continue this mission to the ends of the earth—in every nation, in every culture, in every time period. Now it became clear—or at least they saw glimmers of it—that God had chosen a particular people to carry on the divine mission, to be the face of the Spirit, the bodily presence of Jesus in the world. At Antioch and thereafter, what began to become clear is that God's mission has a church.

And that the church comes to be as the church engages in mission—as it crosses boundaries, as it realizes that its mission is the very mission of God: to go into the world and find God's saving, healing, challenging presence.

Mission precedes the church. As Steve Taylor said last week, the Church is always playing catch-up. Mission is first of all God's: God inside out in the world through the Spirit, God in Jesus teaching, healing, including, suffering. Almost incredibly—as an act of grace!—God

shares that mission with women and men. Mission calls the church into being to serve God's purposes in the world.

It means that the church is not about the church. It is about what Jesus called the Reign of God. We are most church not when we are building up the church, but when we are outside of it: being good parents, being loving spouses, being diligent and honest in our workplace, treating our patients with care if we are health-workers, going the extra mile with our students if we are teachers, living lives responsible to the environment, being responsible citizens, sharing our resources with the needy, standing up for social justice, consciously using inclusive language, treating immigrants fairly, trying to understand people of other faiths, etc., etc.

If mission precedes the church, and constitutes it as such, there will be no "passive" Christians. All Christians will see themselves as called to minister in ordinary and extraordinary ways in their daily lives.

And this is an antidote to war, because it crosses all human boundaries, all fixed borders, no matter the cost, and we become an evolving community of followers, in which people are united in Jesus Christ.

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