

BEING OPEN TO CHANGES OF MIND

2 May 2010 (Easter 5)

Text:

Acts 11: 1-18

Have you ever had to change your mind about something that you have held dear? It is not an easy thing to do, especially if your position on the issue is well known. Our politicians can be quite adept at changing their minds and can sometimes do it quite shamelessly, but others of us have more difficulty. I guess we all change our minds about some things over the years and sometimes it is painful to make the change in our stance, especially if others cannot understand our reasons and accuse us of abandoning a cause.

When it comes to changing our mind about some aspect of the faith or our church life we can find that our friends or fellow church people can feel somewhat betrayed and sometimes we can even lose friends over our change of mind. I recall being very disappointed when the church union debates and decisions of the 1970s divided many Christian families and groups of Christian friends. Giving up positions or practices which have been part of our life for as long as we can remember can be quite painful.

Yet sometimes we do need to change our minds on matters we held dear. Sometimes we have a flash of new insight. In other cases we find that over the years our position on matters we once considered very important softens and even changes. We see that in society as a whole, too. In my lifetime I have seen big changes in community attitudes to things like divorce, same gender relationships, racial issues, the monarchy, and Protestant-Catholic relationships. Where once we might have had strong views on such matters they are no longer strong. At a former stage of our life we might have thought a strong moral stance was necessary as that was what God required, but we have come to see that what we had assumed to be the mind and purpose of God was not necessarily the only position for a Christian to take. Our stance on many issues does tend to evolve over time. You can all think of things about which you have gradually changed your mind. But every now and then we find ourselves in circumstances which lead to a sudden radical change of mind. Something happens which drastically challenges us and causes us to re-think something we thought sacrosanct, be it a matter of deeply held faith, or our position on a social or moral or political issue which we thought was significant. And there can be many things that act as a catalyst for change.

A drastic change in point of view is what happened to the apostle Peter in today's reading. It was a complete about-turn. Peter had grown up in a traditional Jewish society, holding traditional Jewish beliefs and values. Integral to that belief or values system was an understanding that certain things were unclean and to be avoided, and that certain people were unclean and to be avoided. There was an exclusivity which saw fellow-Jews as God's chosen ones and others as Gentiles.

Gentiles were dismissed as "not in our class". Jews had no dealings with Gentiles. That was the clear position of Peter. But it changed overnight, literally, and as a result Peter found himself off-side with many of his friends and associates. People who were close to him could not understand his change of heart, and he had to explain himself.

What happened was that Peter had a dream, and through that dream came to the realisation that what he thought about the Gentiles and relating to the Gentiles was not the way that God thought about the Gentiles and related to the Gentiles. The world view of Peter and his associates was that such things as kosher food laws, circumcision Sabbath observance and keeping pure from contact with Gentiles were basic tenets of Jewish life and faith, and the common understanding was that only by adopting that kind of lifestyle could people become morally acceptable to God and truly be God's people. Peter had been reared on these tenets, and passionately believed them to be God-given. Now a seemingly sacred tenet of Peter's mind and faith was overturned. And it was changed in a very public way. Everyone knew. Within hours Peter found himself in the home of a Gentile, ministering to a Gentile, touching a Gentile, eating and socialising with Gentiles. By the standards he had accepted throughout his life this was scandalous behaviour, and right outside the bounds of religious acceptability. In a very dramatic way God had told him he was wrong. Peter had to eat humble pie, and say that these so-called sacred tenets were not sacred after all.

What Peter discovered in that dramatic dream was that when it comes to human beings God makes no distinctions. All people are loved. Ethnic distinctions mean nothing to God.

Now over the years many Christians have been slow to recognise this. We can be so caught up in the social distinctions of our day that we have failed to appreciate the Biblical message as articulated by St Paul that in Christ there is no such thing as Jew and Gentile, slave and free, male and female.

So over the years even Christians tolerated slavery, apartheid, anti-semitism, and the subordination of women. Often we have let our presuppositions about, say, aboriginals, or Muslims, or Catholics, or yellow hoards or even the local people from the other side of town determine the way we relate to such people or justify the way we don't relate to them. Peter's new understanding challenges how we respond to the plight of the people who now seek refugee status in this country. It challenges the attitude which might have led us to think that people in so called third world countries are not as worthy of our consideration as people in the developed world. It challenge any prejudiced view we might have towards gay couples or drug addicts, or hardened criminals or militant trade unionists, or ruthless business tycoons or people on the dole, or anyone else we care to shun.

As I have written in the newsheet today I am currently involved in a consultancy in the Queensland Synod. That Synod is seeking to redefine its purpose and as part of the process is identifying the values which characterise the Uniting Church. From a wide-ranging consultation it is clear that one of the things that Uniting Church members hold dear is inclusivity, and people point to the way our church allows diversity of theological opinion, welcomes women into church leadership positions, will include gay and lesbian people in our congregations, and shows compassion for all through our wide-ranging *UnitingCare* and *Uniting Aged Care* programs. I am glad that our Queensland members value this characteristic of our church, and I pray that it is a characteristic mark of this Pilgrim congregation, too.

Being inclusive does not always come naturally. Those of you who were here last Sunday may remember my talk with the children when I used the letters of ANZAC to give a message for Christians. After talking about the original ANZAC words I suggested "Australians now zealously assist Christ". After the service one person kindly suggested that New Zealanders

might feel left out of my new formula for Anzac. I could have been far more inclusive if my A was for "all" rather than "Australians". It is wise to be alert to our propensity to live with narrow mindsets and to be willing, like Peter, to have our world view and our faith-view expanded to be more like that of Jesus.

It is interesting that for all the time Peter had spent with Jesus he still held to the "them and us" mentality of his upbringing. He had surely heard Jesus teaching about the new commandment, "A new commandment I give to you that you love one another". Surely he had observed the way Jesus broke many of the taboos about gender relationships, about Sabbath observance and surely he had seen the way Jesus had eaten with so called sinners. Surely he had heard Jesus staunchly defend himself when others criticised him for not holding the traditional line. It just goes to show that prejudices and preconceptions can make us absolutely blind to new insights and new ways of seeing things.

So the story of Peter's dream is a wake-up call to us to guard against having our world-view determined by preconceptions which come from long-term social conditioning rather than from an understanding of the mind and purposes of God as revealed in Jesus Christ.

As we gather at the Lord's Table today it is a time for us to seek release from any preconceptions which get in the way of us hearing God's word, It is a time to recall the gospel teaching that Christ died for all people and promises to all people the gift of a rich life. You come to the table today with a range of other people. Celebrate with them and with us all our common status, along with all humanity, as God's beloved people.

To the praise of the name that is timeless and the love that is boundless.

Amen.

Rev Allan Thompson

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