

ACTS 10  
BREAKING BOUNDARIES

Do you wish you are a member of Honorable Company of Edinburgh Golfers this week? These are the members of Muirfield Golf Club! The society has hit the news headlines for membership reasons. If you've not seen the story, Muirfield's membership is only men and these men have taken a vote on whether they should allow women to be members of their society and club. They did vote in favour, but not by a large enough majority to change the Society's rules. The Club has lost the right to host the Open Championship, which in golfing terms is pretty much the ultimate sanction. This controversy is all about who belongs and who doesn't; a woman can play the course; women can have dinner in the clubhouse, but only as her husband's guest; women can't belong to the club as members alongside men, on any kind of equal standing. The Club or society has been criticised from every quarter for its decision. This is a story all about belonging – who belongs and who doesn't!

Belonging is a big thing. A whole genealogy business is based on people wanting to find out where they belong, both in terms of place, where they come from, and in terms of family, to whom they belong! The mission-thinking of the church has changed: we used to think and be told that people believed in Jesus and then found a sense of belonging in the Church; now some people will suggest that a growing sense of belonging in the church can lead people to believe and become Christians. So, who belongs? The easy answer is to say "everyone!" but it is not as simple as that and if we make it that simple we don't understand the complexities of our society. In a moment, we'll look at the story of Acts 10 and you would think, having that story we'd have got it right, but the church's history with women and their sense of being accepted is chequered to say least; what about children – do they belong to the church family equally with adults? Or people who are different from us – do they belong or not?

If we only read the part of Acts 10 that we read earlier, then we don't really understand the significance of this story; the chapter is too long to read it all and I wanted to read the "exciting" bit, where Cornelius listens to the gospel, accepts it, believes in Jesus and is baptised. That's a great story and all comes about after Cornelius prays and God listens to his prayers and answers them. Peter's ministry is fantastic and the Spirit is at work. But there is a whole other story before we get to this place. God has to prepare the way for the story to happen; God has to prepare Cornelius to receive the gospel; God has to prepare Peter to say 'yes' when the men come to his gate. When we see that whole other part of the story we see how much this is a story about acceptance and belonging and that it is far from straight-forward for the church.

Cornelius is a soldier, an NCO in charge of a hundred men; we're not told much more about him than that, but one significant thing – he is a foreigner; he is not a Jew. He is devout: "*He and...*" (Acts 10:2) He has come so far along the road to faith, but is not quite there yet; his heart is good and he is ready to hear the gospel about Jesus. He needs to be prepared and God prepares him by a dream: in the middle of the day, he sees a vision of an angel telling him to send some men to Joppa to bring Peter; Peter will have something important to tell him. He sent three people to Joppa and they came back with Peter and we know rest of story. Peter preached the good news about Jesus to a most receptive audience; Cornelius and everyone else who was there believed and they were baptised as a sign of their faith. Fine... so far!

God needed to prepare Peter for this trip. Peter is a Jew; Peter has grown up in the church, as it were; he has grown up with Jewish laws and principles; they have shaped his life and until he met Jesus nothing had come along to challenge these principles. John Stott describes this story as "Peter's conversion", not because it was the day

when he became a Christian, but the day when his principles and values changed. In the principles with which Peter grew up, Jews and Gentiles were a million miles apart. Every morning, the Jewish man thanked God that he was not a Gentile dog! In a minute, Peter is going to be invited to visit Cornelius, a Gentile, and to come into his house and to tell him about Jesus. What will Peter do with that invitation? His upbringing and culture should mean he says 'no' to the invitation, but God has different ideas.

Peter has a dream; it is a fairly wild dream and he has it three times to make sure that he gets the message. The dream is based on the Old Testament food laws: some animals are unclean and are not to be eaten, according to the Old Testament. Peter has a dream in which a sheet is full of animals and God says "*Get up, kill and eat*" Peter objects based on his upbringing and his culture, but God says "*Do not...*" (Acts 10:15) Then three men appear at his gate – "come to Cornelius; he wants to hear the gospel". What does Peter do? He goes because "*You are...*" (Acts 10:28) A dream about animals has become all about people and accepting people; God accepts everyone without favouritism, so should we! That's what Peter understands and so he preaches the gospel in Cornelius' house; these Gentiles believe and when the Church calls Peter to account for this strange new development, for these boundaries being broken down, he simply says "*God has...*" (Acts 11:18) There is a place for everyone to belong because of the gospel; grace is for everyone.

The Church had to wrestle long and hard with the idea of the Gentiles being part of the church; you can read the outcome in Acts 15 and the way in which the Church saw what God was doing and followed; it took courage to make that choice, but make it they did. If you want to hear how that sounds as a principle, here is Paul's version in Galatians 3: "*There is...*" (Galatians 3:28) There is no distinction of race – Jews and Gentiles are one; there is no distinction of rank – slaves and free people are one; there is no distinction of gender – men and women are one. "*You are...*" (3:28) This was hugely ground-breaking in the first century; nowhere else was this being said in first century culture. That culture was all about barriers and special belonging: men, Roman citizens, free people all had a higher status; so for Paul to make these claims was huge; here was the gospel transforming society, smashing barriers with the question "who belongs?"

First of all, this is about belonging to God. We are God's children, God's family; we belong to God. We all belong to God; it is blessing of our faith. This is not a blessing for super-strong Christians, super-spiritual people as the only ones who belong. No! This blessing God gives to all of us by His grace. When I first came across the words of our opening hymn *Come people of the risen King* I was taken by the second verse where it tells us that we belong if we have won the battles, but we also belong if we struggle through the night. Some of us feel as if we're quite unworthy to have such grand things said about us; our faith is not very strong; our lives are messy; we just don't deserve it! But grace is not about what we deserve; grace is about God looking at us as we are and loving us anyway! We don't get this blessing because we deserve it for being super-good and devout people; God's family is made up of people of all shapes and sizes, all colours and backgrounds, all ages and stages of life and of faith. We belong; we are God's family; we are all one in Christ Jesus. Thank you Lord, for your grace.

As we belong to God, we also belong to each other. Again we nod our heads and say "yes" to that, but in practice it is more complicated. Here's the challenge: "*Accept one...*" (Romans 15:7) Acceptance is more than just being friendly and saying "good morning"; acceptance is giving out signals and messages to people that we think they really do belong with us. Acceptance is embracing with open arms people who may be

different from us, but we see them as someone whom God loves in the same way as we think He loves us. That has been hard for the church and we have known the principle and the theology but have not always got it right. How can a church that has lived with these words of Paul for two thousand years still have been a source of discrimination especially among women? We are in danger of doing the same to our children and young people still and pushing them to the side! We talk about them as the church of the future, but they are the church of the present; they belong to the church equally with the rest of us. Accept one another as part of the church family. A friend of mine in his church newsletter, came up with the great idea to make this happen more and be more obvious: Say good morning to three people in church today, including one person you've never spoken to before! Then maybe we'll not have people standing awkwardly in the coffee room with nobody speaking to them. We belong to each other.

All of this began when Cornelius prayed. We're not told what he prayed, but we are told that he prayed regularly. So the story begins! Cornelius prayed and God went to work to answer his prayers and to bless him and his family. Cornelius prayed and God gave him a vision and a message about a man called Peter. Cornelius prayed and God gave this man called Peter a vision about food that became a message about people. Cornelius prayed and Peter came to visit him and tell him about Jesus. Cornelius prayed and the Spirit of God went to work in his heart and he became Christian and was baptised. Cornelius prayed and the gospel broke a boundary, a huge boundary between Jew and Gentile and the church was never the same again. It all began when Cornelius prayed!

I know that many of you are carrying huge burdens: some for your children or your grandchildren and the fact that they have walked away from the Church; some are carrying burdens for other members of your family who are weak and vulnerable today; some are carrying burdens for the church in Juniper Green and our future and what that might look like, though some of you are not entirely sure that we have a future. This is not the whole answer and some of you are doing this already and faithfully, but when we pray God makes something happen. Do you believe that? Do we have that hope in our hearts? Not all at once, perhaps, but when we pray God makes something happen. Look at what happened when Cornelius prayed and prayed regularly: his world changed; his world became a better place; Peter was changed; the church was changed. Some of you don't like the idea of change but if these burdens are to be resolved, change needs to happen. It all begins when we pray: when we pray God makes something happen. Pray on and keep praying; God will make something happen for burdens you're carrying!