

ACTS 11:1-18
WALLS OR BRIDGES

Have you ever felt excluded? It might have been a group; it might have been people you thought were friends; it might have been church. Have you ever felt an outsider? What was it that excluded you from the group? Was it the wrong clothes, or the wrong hairstyle, or the wrong way of going about life ('wrong' as far as the group was concerned?), that you were different from all the rest, so you were kept out? How did you feel about being excluded? It is a painful business, to not belong when everyone else seems to enjoy being 'inside'! What kind of barriers can you think of? There are all sorts of barriers: hedges, fences, walls, ditches, railings, moats, computer firewalls; are these for keeping things in or out? There are other invisible barriers: culture, gender, sexuality, race, religion, or others that keep us out of groups or keep others out of the groups to which we belong!

There are some things we'd like to exclude from our church building: draughts! Dampness! But if I were to ask you "*Who* would you like to exclude from our church?" I wonder how you would react to that question. I hope you'd be shocked at the very idea of excluding some people because they are different from us. I hope that we'd want to welcome and accept everybody, no matter who they are. But are there people who might feel excluded? What barriers might they feel exclude them from our church? That is a hard question, because we might not recognise that there are any barriers. What might we be doing to create barriers, even if we're not aware of it? What does a visitor make of us? Can we, who come here every week, imagine ourselves in someone else's shoes? Street Pastors have been giving people cards to show to our welcome team: "here is someone who is new to church"; we have badges on our noticeboard to say we are aware and we will welcome you. That commits us to be open-hearted, warm, and generous in our welcome, to sit with someone so that they know what we do and when.

Peter is telling a story to the church in Jerusalem. He is explaining what he did with a Roman soldier called Cornelius; more he is explaining what God did with the soldier called Cornelius. The issue for Peter and his audience as he tells the story is that Cornelius is different from them: they are all Jews, Cornelius is not, he is a Roman, a Gentile, one of the group of people whom the Jews have despised for generations. Now Peter has to tell his friends about the way in which God has blown all of that history and division out of the water, gone, for ever! Neither is this something superficial, or fly-by-night, that if you close your eyes and think hard enough it will go away. This is a root-and-branch change to the way things are for the church and the way things will always be from now on. Later, Paul would write: "*There is...*" (*Galatians 3:28*) Here's where that all began.

Peter is telling the story and he tells of what John Stott calls four "hammer-blows of divine revelation" that will change Peter's mind. The first hammer-blow is a vision from God of a sheet full of animals and birds. "*I saw...*" (*Acts 11:5*) The Jews had and still have all sorts of laws about what animals they can and cannot eat; there is a whole catalogue of unclean animals, not to be eaten. But in this vision, God says "*Get up...*" (*Acts 11:7*) There is then an argument: "*Surely not...*" "*Do not...*" (*Acts 11:8f*) God is driving a coach and horses through these food laws; nothing is now unclean. The Jews had taken these food laws and then applied them to people; there were unclean people, people to be excluded, avoided, and not "touched". The Gentiles were not worthy to be touched or talked to, and certainly not considered a friend, brother, or colleague. The Jews still have that attitude: they are God's chosen people and look down on others; that attitude that is at the heart of much of the hatred that exists in the Middle East today. Peter is told to change that attitude and to accept everyone as loved by God. Hard!

The second hammer-blow was a command that God gave to Peter. Just as the vision was going away, three men appeared at Peter's gate; he had never met these men before; he didn't know who they were, but they wanted Peter to come with them to meet their master; he wanted to hear the gospel. Here is God's command: "*the Spirit...*" (Acts 11:12) "Go with these men and it will be good; all will become clear!" What was Peter to do? Did he know that they were Gentiles? Probably! He went; Peter did as God said and went with these men; he took six brothers along with him and the seven of them travelled from Joppa to Caesarea, to the home of the Roman centurion stationed at the centre of the occupying Roman army in Israel. Peter went into the unknown – at God's command!

The third hammer-blow – God had been at work at the other end of this conversation, preparing Cornelius. "*Send to...*" (Acts 11:13b) God had been working in both men, preparing them to meet. God had been preparing Peter by the vision, so that he was ready to accept a Gentile as a Christian; God had been working in Cornelius, inspiring him to send for Peter so that he could hear the gospel and the Spirit was at work in his heart so that he was ready to believe it. God is still doing this today: He is at work in us to prepare us to tell people about Jesus, and He is preparing people to hear the gospel, opening people's hearts so that they are open to hear and ready to believe. We should pray for the Spirit to do this work and for us to be ready and to have the courage to take the opportunities presented to us.

The fourth and final hammer blow is seen in what God did! "*As I...*" "*So if...*" (Acts 11:15,17) While Peter was speaking, God poured out His Spirit on Cornelius and his household in exactly the same way as He poured His Spirit on Peter and the others on the day of Pentecost; there was no difference. God is welcoming this Roman soldier and his household into the family of faith; God is showing that these people are His people, His Spirit lives in them, just as He lives in Peter. What joins them together? God has done the same thing in both of them. How can Peter oppose God? He can't. He has to go along with what God is doing and accept Cornelius as a brother in Christ, as a partner in the faith. They were baptised, a sign of admission into the Christian family; they were accepted because "*God has...*" (Acts 11:18) "God has welcomed believing Gentiles into His family on equal terms with believing Jews." (Stott) For Peter to do anything other than accept them was to oppose God!

We live in a world where there seem to be more walls than bridges. The most famous example is the United States where President Trump is determined to build his wall to keep out the Mexicans and others from the South. The wall is not to keep people in, but clearly to keep people out. Israel has built a wall to keep Palestinians out of Jerusalem; there are ways through, but these gates are carefully controlled and again are designed to keep people out. How do Europeans living in the UK feel right now? If they are still here, they feel unloved and unwanted. Those who farm soft fruit in Fife, Angus and Perthshire will tell you how much fruit went to waste last year because workers from Eastern Europe weren't able to come and pick it; the barriers are up! How can our communities flourish when there are barriers to banking, when shops are shutting on the high streets, when people are bullied for being different, when the barriers to services are many. Even when you call on the phone: how many levels of choice (press 1 for...) and how many of us give up before we get to the person we need? There are barriers, walls, everywhere.

The challenge for the Church is be different from all of that, to go against culture and to build bridges not walls. We are to accept one another. Now that is a huge challenge. So many people have left the church in Scotland over the last 10 years because of the implacable hatreds that have been expressed, by decisions the church has taken, by attitudes that have been shown on both sides of a debate. We are to accept one another – it is just not happening.

There is a difference between tolerance and acceptance: when someone new comes to our congregation, we look and see and say we're happy that they're here – that's tolerance. But, how about sitting beside them? Make sure they know when to sit and when to stand; make sure they know how to find the words of the hymns, prayers, and Bible readings – that's acceptance! It's bigger, it's harder, it's better. The Church should be known as the place where grace operates and Christians accept anyone; that's our challenge. John in the book of Revelation has a vision of a day when the walls are gone and God is with us and we are worshipping God together!

Peter was telling the story of what God did to make that happen for the first time with a Gentile, breaking down Jewish prejudice, the four hammer-blows that changed Peter's attitude, that opened his heart, and that led him to welcome Cornelius, a Roman soldier, a Gentile, that made him feel at home in the family of God. This was something God did. There are two conversions in this story: first, God at work to change Cornelius' heart, that he become a Christian. God's Spirit is also at work to change Peter, to change his attitudes, to change the minds of the apostles and brothers. Pray that God will be at work in His Church today, to inspire us to build bridges, to inspire us to knock down walls, to find peace and reconciliation and to accept one another and others in Jesus' name. Being excluded is a horrible feeling; being welcomed warms the cockles of our hearts.