

In-person sermon on Sunday 14 May 2022 by Geoff Oates, Lay Reader

Acts 11. 5: "I was in the city of Joppa praying, and in a trance I had a vision."

The early Church – the very early Church that we know from the first few chapters of the book of Acts – soon had to wrestle with what today we might call a problem of success.

Alongside the Jews who are acclaiming Jesus as their Lord, there are foreigners, gentiles, who are showing unexpected enthusiasm for the Good News of Jesus.

Is Jesus any of their business at all? If he is, how does the Christian community welcome these people? Do they have to undergo the formal steps of conversion to the Jewish faith and follow its rules and rituals? Or does that not matter any more as we await the fulfilment of a radical new Kingdom?

Peter's vision in Joppa changes the whole shape of the mission of the early Church. The voice in the vision, accompanied by a graphic visual aid of a giant picnic blanket spread with all manner of meat, calls time on Jewish religious dietary rules and opens the road for the

mission to the Gentiles. The mission that, eventually, brought the Gospel to us in Hertford.

This is not a trivial matter. The dietary rules went to the heart of Jewish identity. They still do. They are about obedience to God's ancient laws, and they are about being different. Different from the other nations on their borders, different from the foreigners who shared their homeland then, just as they do now. Set apart for God. The technical word is Holy.

So, let's be mischievous and indulge in a little 'alternative history'. What if....

What if Peter had spoken back to that voice from heaven and said, 'Sorry God, but your vision is a direct contradiction to Leviticus 14. 1-46 and Deuteronomy 11. 3-21, so I'm not going to follow it.'

Would we still be here, but worshipping our Messiah on a Saturday, the Jewish sabbath, and steering well clear of pork sausages? Or maybe we wouldn't be here at all, because the Gospel would never have reached our shores.

I wonder, are we ever guilty of standing in the way of the spread of God's grace into the world because we think God is not reading his Bible the way he should do?

In Lent, a handful of us joined with Anglican study groups

across the nation to address another challenge to the way we spread the Gospel, in the rapidly shifting sands of human sexuality. I wonder how many of the LGBTQ community, or of those who have suffered divorce, might see themselves as today's Gentiles. Still ready to seek God, but looking for a new Peter, someone with the vision to open the doors of churches that seem closed to them.

Are we being called here to show the boldness Peter showed in opening up new channels of grace?

Let me throw out another question. Peter had his world-changing vision in the city of Joppa. Where might Joppa be for us?

First of all, where was the real Joppa? Anyone know? What is it called today? Think oranges. It's a seafront suburb in the urban sprawl of Tel Aviv.

In Bible times, it was the nearest seaport for Jerusalem. Politically the coast was part of Judea in Jesus' time, but ethnically and culturally it was dominated by Greeks and the descendants of Israel's ancient enemies, the Philistines. Like most ports it was cosmopolitan, morally a bit dodgy, the sort of place you wouldn't want your daughter to hang around at night. Full of foreigners who eat funny food.

The sort of place an honest Galilean country boy like Simon

Peter shouldn't feel at home. But Peter still goes there. Where might our Joppa be?

Who might our Gentiles be? Actually, I think we'll find them all around us. Two generations who may have grown up surrounded by churches, but have no idea what goes on behind their closed doors. People who may still hunger for some form of spiritual meaning in their lives, for answers to life questions, but no longer have any connection to the ceremonies, language and social patterns of typical parish life.

As a tutor recently put it on the Pioneer Ministry course my wife attended, to so many people the heavy doors and dark windows of a church building are as intimidating as the doors of a betting shop to people like me. They have no idea what goes on inside, just a strong suspicion that it not their thing!

God calls us to risk a trip down to Joppa, to frontier territory, where people don't look like us and don't act like us. To places where we don't feel at home. Not a geographical trip, but a cultural one. You won't have to go far to find places where the old values and standards of established Christianity have been left behind.

The challenge that the early Church faced is repeated for us. Are we called to make them like us, with all our beloved traditions and heritage? Or are we merely called to reveal

the love and grace of God to them, and look forward in faith, like the early Church, to a radical new Kingdom?

By the way, I do believe one of the great positives to come out of the Covid pandemic has been the readiness of so many churches to do new things and move more of what they do outside the walls and into open spaces, physical and virtual. Peter would have approved of that.

Final question: does God still call us to be Holy? Set apart, different? Yes, different, but not separate. Holy cannot mean keeping ourselves apart, staying together in our safe, spiritual heartland, in our Jerusalem where everyone thinks and acts like us.

And if we are still called to be Holy, to be different, to stand out for God's sake, how should we be Holy? In our zeal for ancient laws and traditions, or by something else. How did our Gospel reading end? 'By this, people will know you are my disciples - by your love for one another'.

