

Easter 5 Year C 2022

Have you ever come across the word *commensality*? No? Neither had I until I read a commentary on today's reading from the Acts of the Apostles. *Commensality* - sharing a table, eating together. The *mensa* bit you might remember if you did Latin at school. I got a grade 9 in GCE O Level, which tells you how rotten I was in Latin, but *mensa* I remember, one of the first nouns we had to learn to decline - and knowing nominative, vocative, genitive etc. proved very useful years later when I was learning German. However, back to the point. Eating together, sitting around the same table. This story of Peter and Cornelius is clearly very important to Luke and those for whom he is writing, as he tells us the story - the history - of the early church. Firstly he tells us what happened (Acts 10), then he tells us about Peter explaining what happened - today's reading - in Acts 11, and then in Acts 15 Peter tells a council of the church in Jerusalem that he had been chosen by God to be the first Apostle to the Gentiles (I bet you thought that was Paul), and you might think that this is all very interesting, but not very important. But consider this - if Paul had been the first or only evangelist to the Gentiles, would the church in Jerusalem have accepted him and his converts, would

they have sat down at table and eat with them? I don't think so, and Christianity would either have become an exclusive sect of Judaism, or a religion totally disconnected from its Jewish roots. For Luke, this incident is so important that he tells it three times, so that we know - and the early church knows - that the acceptance of Gentiles into the believing community is ordained by God, is part of His plan for the building of the Kingdom. There can no longer be 'us' and 'them', insiders and outsiders, the acceptable and the unacceptable. And by giving Peter - one of the Twelve - the lead role in this opening up of the community to 'the other', rather than Paul, Luke gives us a clear indication that this change started within the believing community, as they recognised the work of the HS active in the household of Cornelius.

Peter did not set out to break the rules of his Jewish heritage, he was not trying to go outside the accepted norms of Judaism - God intervened in his life, calling him to overcome his prejudices and accept the universality of his mission. Peter speaks to us today as he spoke to the Jewish conservatives in Jerusalem - 'This is my story, but it could easily be your story. What will you do when God says to you 'Open your heart, open your mind, open

your arms'. We sing (or used to sing) *Tell me the old, old story* - but it isn't an old, old story - it is a story for today, a story of love and acceptance - women (you didn't think we have finally won that battle, did you?); homosexuals (do you really think that battle is over?); transgender people (new battle ground); abortion (here we go again, men wanting to control women's bodies). The old, old story of division, of barriers, of 'us' and 'them', I'm right so you must be wrong, the refusal to accept *commensality*.

Today's Gospel reading begins 'When Judas had gone out' - Judas on his way to gather the armed guards who will arrest Jesus - Judas the betrayer - Judas who had had his feet washed by Jesus, Judas who had shared in this last meal of Jesus and the disciples, Judas, one of the Twelve. He has gone out. He is the last person you would think Jesus would want to share a meal with, Judas, totally integrated into the community around the table, taking bread, drinking wine, with Jesus - and we have the audacity to put rules and regulations around who can share this meal, or who can preside at the table.

Peter told his story, he didn't argue theological points, cite chapter and verse, rail at their hard-heartedness - he simply told

his story and let it speak for itself - this is what happened and who was I to stand in the way of God?

I think we need to do much more of that - tell our stories, rather than saying 'this is what the church believes/teaches'; better to say 'this is my experience', 'this is what happened to me'. 'I know this, I have this, I experience this - this is what I come to know, through what has happened, is happening, to me'. Some of us are cradle Christians, some of us have come to faith later in life, some of us started out in the cradle, walked away, and then came back - but we all have stories to tell, to share, to rejoice in. And we will all have had those dark moments, the pain, the doubt, the emptiness, the tough side of the journey. We need to have the courage to talk about those moments too - not make a fairy tale of our journey - to tell it how it is, and to explain why we are still here.

Peter stood in front of the old guard conservatives in Jerusalem and told his story - it wasn't easy for him, neither the event nor the telling of the event - and at first they were silenced - and then the penny dropped, and they praised God. We need to go out and tell our stories - so that, again and again, the penny will drop

- and *God's* praise will be heard - 'for his name only is exalted; his glory is above earth and heaven. Praise the Lord'.