

A Sermon for Epiphany 1, Year B  
Acts 10:34–38; Mark 1:7–11  
January 8, 2006 – Fr. Jim Cook

## *The Story of Cornelius and Peter.*

**T**his morning's reading from the Acts of the Apostles provided us with a snippet from the story of Cornelius and Peter. And I suspect it's a story that made it into the canon of scripture because it describes how the early church resolved a conflict that was brewing among her members. But it's a story that's worth hearing in fuller detail, because it still speaks to the church today, and offers us some insight on how we might begin to resolve some of the differences that divide us. So, this is the story of Cornelius and Peter.

Once upon a time, there was a man who lived in Caesarea named Cornelius. He was a Gentile, and he was an officer in the Roman army, but he was also a devout believer in God. One afternoon, as he was praying, Cornelius had a vision: an angel told him to send some men to Joppa to bring the Apostle Peter. Cornelius did as he was told, and sent three men to find Peter.

The very next day, Peter was on the roof of his house in Joppa, attending to his prayers. It was about noon, and so he began to feel the pangs of hunger. While the desires for eating and praying were competing within him, Peter also had a vision: something like a large sheet was being lowered, by its four corners, from the heavens to the earth. And contained within that sheet were all sorts of four-legged animals, as well as reptiles and birds. Then a voice told Peter, "Get up, kill and eat."

Naturally, because a number of the animals before him were unclean, and therefore forbidden by Jewish religious law for consumption, Peter's reply to the voice was "No way! I've never eaten anything impure or unclean." Then the voice said to Peter, "Don't call anything unclean that God has made clean." Two more times, the voice told Peter to eat, and two more time Peter refused. Then the sheet was taken back into heaven, and the vision ended.

While Peter was wondering about what it all meant, the three men sent from Cornelius arrived at Peter's house. And the Spirit told Peter that these men were to take him to Caesarea, and that Peter was to go with them, and talk to Cornelius.

And so, the next day, Peter and the three men, and a few others, departed for Caesarea. When they arrived at Cornelius' home, two days later, Peter was warmly greeted. And Peter said to the assembly, "I'm sure you are aware that Jews are not allowed to associate with Gentiles. But I am here because God showed me, in a vision, that I should not call any man impure or unclean."

And when Cornelius told Peter about the vision he had from God, Peter uttered those famous words which we heard in today's reading from Acts: "I truly understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him."

That, in a nutshell, was the story of Cornelius and Peter. And why we should care about it is because it describes how the early church resolved a conflict it was having; a conflict we can still see in the church today.

The gist of the first-century church's conflict was this: the Jews believed that for a person to be acceptable to God, that person had to be a Jew. In other words, if you're not one of us, you're unacceptable to God. But the Jewish Christians, like Peter, were coming to realize that the acceptance of God did not follow religious boundaries, or theological schools of thought, or even specific behaviors or lifestyles. For example: even though Cornelius was a Gentile, and even though he was an active member of the much-despised Roman army, nevertheless he was acceptable to God, and therefore welcomed into the church, because, as Acts 10:2 describes him, "he gave generously to those in need and prayed to God regularly."

It was this new understanding that enabled Peter to realize that God really was quite impartial, and it was not up to him, Peter, or any of the leaders of the young church, to label a person as impure or unclean, as an insider or an outsider, as one of us or one of them.

Robert W. Wall, in his commentary on this story, wrote this:

*The biblical idea that God has chosen a particular people as [the] object of special regard cultivates the dangerous suspicion that God did not therefore choose others. Those believers who think themselves among God's "elect" are often inclined on this theological basis to think that God has not chosen anyone else who disagrees with their beliefs or customs. We pin labels on our disagreeable opponents to disenfranchise them: they are "liberal" or "conservative" or "homosexual" or "Jewish" or "Lutheran" or "female" or "laity" or "black" or "divorced." Yet what has become crystal clear to Peter is that to do so is not the prerogative of pious Israel or anyone else.*

Given all this, it doesn't take a genius to realize that many of the conflicts our church is currently experiencing are over distinctions that not even God is willing to make. And you know what those distinctions are, so I don't have to list them out for you. And the early church resolved its conflict the way Peter and Cornelius did; not by focusing on their differences, but by emphasizing their similarities. Because Peter and Cornelius both prayed to God regularly, and gave generously to those in need, they could be members of the same body. Christians around the world would do well to pay attention to the story of Peter and Cornelius.

But one more thing needs to be said before I finish. While I was preparing these remarks, I was surprised by the brevity of today's gospel reading – there's a short introduction to the ministry of John the Baptist, a very short description of the baptism of Jesus, and the report of a voice speaking from heaven. But after wrestling with the story of Cornelius and Peter, I began to realize that the important point in today's gospel didn't require a long reading. Because in the context of what we've learned, first about Peter and Cornelius and, second, about the conflict within the

early church, the most important part of today's gospel reading is contained in the words spoken from heaven: "You are my son."

Here's the point: we all know that Jesus wasn't made God's son through his baptism; he was always God's son. His baptism simply reminded the people of Jesus' relationship to God. In much the same way, I believe that our own baptism does not make us God's children, because I believe we've always been his children. Baptism simply reminds us of the relationship we all enjoy with God.

And so, what the story of Cornelius and Peter tells us, and what the gospel reading reminds us, is that we are *all* God's children. We are siblings, brothers and sisters, in the world-wide family of God. And whenever we're ever tempted to begin drawing distinctions – between conservatives and liberals, between orthodox and revisionists, between Catholic and Protestant, between black and white, between male and female – whenever we're tempted to draw these distinctions, we need to remember that they are all trumped by our shared relationship to God.