

LOOKING AT CORNELIUS'S EXPERIENCE THROUGH THE LENS OF THE MISSION OF THE SPIRIT

Generally speaking, the Romans in the gospels and Acts get a pretty bad press. That isn't surprising because a fair few people joined Jesus's Kingdom of God group at least partly because they thought he was the best way to get rid of the invaders. While Jesus had tried to expand their thinking for three years and the coming of the Spirit with wind, fire and miracles had begun to point them to a different kind of Kingdom —of the power of love rather than the love of power it was still quite a leap and they weren't there yet. Actually it feels like we are still working on understanding the Kingdom in 2020. On the other hand centurions turn out against all expectation to be good and open and thoughtful and among these Cornelius is an absolute star.

All the pen pictures we have are really short but there are some things we can make guesses about. We do know his regiment, which was mainly made up of commonwealth soldiers including locals, and we know that he was based at Caesarea, the place that Philip had moved to. We know that he had a family and probably planned to settle in Caesarea when he retired.

We know about some of his beliefs and behaviour. He believed in Yahweh, the God of the Jews. He was further down the spiritual path that the Ethiopian administrator had been travelling on. As far as behaviour was concerned, he gave generously to those in need and prayed to God regularly.

One afternoon he has a remarkably affirming vision. As visions go, it's not in the least vague. He distinctly sees an angel. And God wants Cornelius to know that he is a good worshipper. Not a Christian, not even a Jew (because he wasn't circumcised) but a worshipper. Interesting.

Because God's standard for worship has been challenging all through history Temple, tabernacle, right the way back to Abel who got it and Cain who missed it by a mile. Jesus had made that point when he stopped at the well in Samaria. 'God is spirit, and his worshipers must worship in the Spirit and in truth.' 'You need the power of the Spirit to worship God as he really is.' Cornelius's prayer and generosity had reached God's senses—just like burnt grain mixed with incense.

Its easy to treat the angels introduction as though it doesn't much matter but in fact its quite earth shattering really—somebody who isn't a follower of Jesus worshipping God in the power of the Spirit. Then the angel gets to practicalities. Send men to fetch Peter. Peter who is 30 miles away on tour.

Disciples in Joppa had got Peter from Lydda to pray for Tabitha. Now he is going to get an invite to Caesarea. As always its easy to laugh at Peter, but he was moving in the right direction. He may have been struggling over the finer points of food regulations, but he was staying over the shop of Simon the tanner—a really stinky and ritually unclean job.

Anyway. Long story short. Two, three days after the original angel, Peter, now part of a party of ten arrives. After a bit Cornelius draws the preliminaries to an end by saying it was good of you to come. Now we are all here in the presence of God to listen to everything the Lord has commanded you to tell us.

So what is significant in the narrative. Cornelius still needs to hear the detailed good news of believing in Jesus and receiving forgiveness of sins in his name. He is 'technically' not yet a follower of Jesus. Here in the Cornelius's experience, Right on the surface are some facts. But he prays to God and is generous. He worships authentically. He experiences and identifies the

presence of God. Nevertheless, there is still ground to be covered and it matters that he explicitly declares Jesus as Lord and receives the Spirit even though he already has an amazing connection with the Spirit.

I was taught that the Spirit's interaction with those who weren't Christians was narrow; to convict them of sin, of righteousness and of judgement to come'. The Spirit's loving assurance was only for us Christians. That the Holy Spirit made them feel bad made us feel even more holy than we did already. Any sense of loving presence was fake and so we poured cold water on what was a spark of the Spirit. What we called evangelism was sometimes de-evangelism.

- But people do come across God's presence, or perhaps God's presence (the Holy Spirit) comes to them. A couple of years back I met Gemma, married, teenage children. Home counties. She had trained as a fabric designer. Lost her way a bit. Found faith two or three years before. As a child she'd been anxious and the maid where they lived in Portugal had taught her to pray with the rosary. Throughout her adult life she'd felt that God had something for her to do. From time to time, she'd felt his presence and heard his voice. She'd tried training as a reiki healer but she'd found that she wasn't good at that—could do the massage but didn't see angels. She'd only found the whole story when a friend invited her to their baptism. Forty years of intimations from scared child to competent wife. Doing her best feeling the presence. Needed somebody to reach out.
- That year I also interviewed Richard. He had totally rejected God after watching his grandad, who he was close to dying from asbestosis—How could a good God allow his grandad to suffer like that? But he connected with a church through his teenage stepdaughter and over a single Easter weekend went to a Maunday Thursday vigil, a Good Friday service and an Easter Sunday celebration, where on each occasion he was aware of being in the presence of God: in the quietness of the Cathedral, in a school hall as nails were driven into a post and in what he described as an Easter 'riot'. It was a while after that he 'nailed his colours to the mast' in a Facebook post.
- Janet Soskice a Professor at Cambridge tells her story: In my case faith came from a dramatic religious experience. I was in the shower, on an ordinary day, and found myself to be surrounded by a presence of love, a love so real and personal that I could not doubt it. Above all, I felt myself to have been addressed, not without any words or for any particular reason, and certainly not from any merit—it was in that sense gratuitous— but by one to whom I could speak.

All of these were hugely positive and affirming experiences. It is possible, of course, that some religious experiences could be from an evil source but, if God is more active in the world than evil, what are the odds?

A couple more thoughts. If you are new to religious experience, particularly if you are worried about being thought irrational or worse mad, the person who is willing to talk about the mystical and mysterious, is a life saver. Lets just go back to that quote from Paul when he was in Athens.

From one ancestor God made all nations to inhabit the whole earth, and he allotted the times of their existence and the boundaries of the places

where they would live, so that they would search for God and perhaps grope for him and find him—though indeed he is not far from each one of us. (Acts 17: 26-27)

You may say, I've never met anybody like that. My question is, 'When did you last ask somebody?' What have you done to let people know that you are a safe person to talk to about spiritual experience.