

'It is my judgement, therefore, that we should not make it difficult for the Gentiles who are turning to God.'

Acts 15.19.

In our study of *Acts*, can you cast your mind back to that strange vision that Peter had while having a siesta on the roof of his house in chap 10? He saw a sheet coming down from heaven with animals forbidden in the OT to be eaten. Peter was told to eat them. At first he refused, because it went against his Jewish upbringing. But when Cornelius, the Roman centurion, a Gentile, called at his house to ask Peter to heal his servant, Peter realised that the vision was not about eating forbidden meats, but about embracing *Gentiles*. Well, by now the matter of whether Jesus was for *Gentiles*, or just for Jews had reached crisis point among the first Christians.

Some of the strict 'Jewish' Christians insisted that any Gentile who wanted to become a Christian had to become a Jew first, ie a man had to be circumcised first, Acts 15.1... Paul and Barnabas thought this monstrous, and in fact Paul's letter to the Galatians is all about this, v2... It became so hot and heavy that a meeting was called, the Council of Jerusalem, v2b... At Jerusalem the Judaizers made their case, v5... Peter then got up and told the brethren how many Gentiles had already come to a saving knowledge of Jesus Christ, not because they had *earned* it by performing circumcision, but because God had given them faith as a *gift*, vv7-11... We are here to celebrate Baptism. It's not something *we* do, as we offer Sophie to God, but something *God* does to Sophie, even before she can understand it. He puts his arms around her and says, 'Mine'. When God makes the first move towards us,

especially when we don't deserve it, it's called *Grace*, v11...

Back to the Council of Jerusalem. Paul and Barnabas now gave *their* accounts of how God was clearly working among the Gentiles whom most Jews despised, v12... Then James, having heard all sides, gave his judgement, v13... v19...

This was a momentous decision. Had it gone the other way, that Jesus was only for Jews, then you and I, Gentiles all, would not be Christians. We could not be saved.

Now sometimes people say to me, 'Why do we need the OT? What's the point of all those gruesome stories of killing and violence?' Well, the OT is vital, because it makes a crucial statement. The OT tells us that God meant to bless us. His plan was that we should all live in the Paradise of the Garden of Eden in peace love and harmony for ever. He made each of us to be happy. But of course, because he loves us, he gave us freedom to choose, and we generally make wrong choices. Adam and Eve were told not to eat of the fruit of the tree. Like us, they thought they knew better than God. And the rest of the OT with all its blood and nastiness is the record of what happens when human beings think they can live without God.

But the OT is *also* the account of how God is working to get us back to that original Paradise. I've pointed you already to that crucial promise that God gave to Abraham in *Gen 12.2-3* on p13... 'All peoples on earth will be blessed through you'. *All* peoples, not just Jews. And *everyone*, Jews and Gentiles will be blessed. God wants to bless us all.

Today is Palm Sunday, of course when Jesus rode triumphantly into Jerusalem on a donkey. Turn to p1016, to

*Mark* 11, where on the next day Jesus loses it and throws the money-changers out of the Temple. At v17 he quotes the OT (*Isaiah* 56.7)... Only Mark's gospel includes Isaiah's words 'for all nations', v17... This all stems from God's ancient promise to Abraham that through him God will bless everyone. As the Bible proceeds we know that it is through *Jesus*, descended from Abraham, that we will all, Jew and Gentiles, be blessed.

Because Jesus paid the price of our sins on the Cross on Good Friday, we will be *blessed* by being forgiven and having our guilt and shame for things we have done removed. Because Jesus was raised from the dead three days later on that first Easter Day, we will be *blessed* by knowing that death is not the end, and that we shall live beyond the grave. Because of Jesus we can wipe away our past, we can live confidently in the present because Christ is with us, and we can face the future without fear. That is real blessing, and it's all because of Christ, and it's for Jews and Gentiles.

You possibly have never heard of that Council of Jerusalem in *Acts* 15, but without it, we would not be here today. We Gentiles would not have been included in Jesus. As it is, Jesus is for everyone, because God promised Abraham that he would bless *all* the peoples of the earth.

So then, *if* everyone is included in Jesus Christ, is Jesus all-inclusive? 'Inclusive' is today's buzz-word, isn't it? We have government sponsored 'social-exclusion units'. People might be losing their jobs these days, but there's no end of 'inclusion officers'. And this mania for inclusivity is all part of today's policy of tolerance and diversity.

So, is the 'all-inclusive' Jesus a right-on dude all into non-judgemental tolerance and diversity? Well, no actually. Just look at our passage in *Mark 11* on p1016. Didn't he angrily overturn the tables of the money-changers? He wasn't too tolerant of their greed and corruption. And calling them *thieves* was a bit judgemental, don't you think?

Look in the paragraph above, vv12-14, where Jesus is cursing the fig tree; lots of leaves, but no fruit... Jesus is describing the Jews. They *look* good, but there's no fruit. That is hardly Jesus being tolerant and non-judgemental.

There is an awful lot of right-on rubbish spoken from our pulpits about how God is so loving that he will forgive anything; about Jesus being so inclusive that anything goes, that everyone, whatever their life-style, is welcome. Well, let me tell you that that is not what the Bible says. God does actually have some standards. Jesus did *not* welcome the money-changers. He chucked them out! God does *not* wink at our fiddling, our lying, our violence and abuse of others. God wants to *bless* us all, and we are *not* blessed when we live lives of selfishness, addiction, or anger. That's not proper living. This isn't how God meant us to live.

Christ *does* include us all, but not so that we can continue in our bad old ways. He wants us to repent of all that and turn back to God. When we live his way, our lives will be blessed. He died on that Cross on Good Friday to get rid of all that sin and selfishness which drag us down and make life horrible. He includes us all so that he can save us from all that, and to give us all a better future.