

While Peter was wondering about the meaning of the vision, the men sent by Cornelius found out where Simon's house was and stopped at the gate. They called out, asking if Simon who was known as Peter was staying there. Acts 10.17-18.

So Cornelius the Roman centurion in Caesarea has a weird dream about some chap he's never heard of called Simon Peter, and not long afterwards the same Simon Peter further down the coast at Joppa has a weird vision which concerns Cornelius. Acts 10.9ff tells us that Peter went up on to the roof at midday to pray. He fell into a trance, and in the vision he saw a huge sheet in the sky filled with all sorts of animals and birds, vv9-12... Then wasn't too bad until Peter heard a voice (actually the voice of the Lord, v14) telling him to kill them and to eat them, vv13-14... Peter was shocked. It was like telling a Jew to eat a bacon sandwich. No! He refused. Scripture told him these creatures were unclean. But the Lord told him that they were no longer impure, v15...

It was such a difficult lesson for Peter, a good Jew, to learn, that he had to see the vision *three* times. This was a very difficult thing for Peter to come to terms with, v16... God understood and gave him the vision three times. What an understanding, patient and gracious God is with us!

While God was trying to chisel this new idea into Peter's head, three men knocked at his door. They were the men sent by Cornelius, of course, vv19-23...

So what's going on here? Cornelius as a Roman, as a Gentile, a non-Jew, was seen as 'unclean' by Jews. God wanted Cornelius to meet Peter, but Peter, as a good Jew, would naturally refuse to meet him. God clearly had some mind-changing to do; hence the weird vision of the sheet, v28...

Well, that's all very interesting, but what has that got to say to you today? First of all, it is a warning to all of us not to get too stuck into our rut. Just because we have thought something for a long time, and just because everyone else thinks it, doesn't make it right. Sometimes God has to shake us up to start thinking in a new way. How do you view those tragedies and disappointments in your life? As setbacks? Or as challenges, as growing-points? Sometimes God has to get us by the scruff of the neck to get us to change.

Where *Peter* had to do a lot of rethinking was his attitude towards non-Jews. The mainstream Jewish view was that Gentiles were outside God's purpose. God was concerned only with Jews, and only Jews would be saved. God had to tell Peter that this was *wrong*. And it was through this strange vision of the sheet in the sky full of unclean animals.

Now I want to make an important point here about interpretation. The gay lobby argues that, yes, the OT may indeed say that homosexuality is wrong, but the Spirit has now told us that it is OK. Look for instance at how the Holy Spirit told Peter, here in *Acts 10*, that what the OT used to say was unclean is now clean. Clever isn't it? But do remember that the serpent in the Garden of Eden was the most subtle of all the creatures! Homosexuality was wrong in the OT, but now it's OK. It's a new revelation. The trouble with that is that God seems to be contradicting himself. In this vision of the sheet to Peter, God is not contradicting himself. He is actually getting Peter and all the other Jews to see what he was *always* them. God never said that he would save only Jews.

Let's go back to p13, to *Gen 12.2-3* ... '*all peoples on earth would be blessed through Abraham*'. The Jews were merely God's *agents* of salvation. P735, *Isaiah 49.6*... Israel was '*a light for the Gentiles*'. Jews had forgotten this. Peter needed to hear what God had *always* been saying. So this was no *new* revelation, but God's bringing Peter back to his old truth.

And so, back to p1104, to *Acts 10*, Peter could now make this momentous declaration in v34 that God loves everyone equally ... And then something amazing happened. In *Acts 2* we read about the coming on the Holy Spirit on the believers in Jerusalem at Pentecost. In chap 8, through our friend Philip, we read how the Spirit came upon the Samaritans, (*also once despised by Jews*). And now, here in chap 10 we read of the Spirit coming upon the *Gentiles*, vv44-48... The Spirit comes upon those in Jerusalem, in Samaria, and now on faraway Gentiles. Can we go back to the beginning of *Acts* on p1092, to Jesus' words which are really the key text of *Acts*, 1.8 ...?

So Cornelius with his dream and Peter with his strange vision play a vital role in making sure that Jesus Christ is for the whole world, not just for Jews. Christianity is not a western religion. The saving Gospel of Jesus Christ is for every single person from every country in the world.

So what does this account of Cornelius and Peter have to say to you today? First, that sometimes God has to shake up our old comfortable ways of thinking. We're never too old to learn new things. We mustn't stay in our rut. And second, we are reminded that Christianity is a *world* religion.

But there's something else here which speaks to us also.

When Cornelius was having his dream, he knew nothing about Peter. And when Peter was having his vision of the sheet on the rooftop, he knew nothing of Cornelius. That speaks very powerfully to me, for it reminds me that what is happening to me at the moment is not the full picture. *Acts* 10 tells us that God was at work in Cornelius' and Peter's lives *at the same time*, but each did not know about the other.

Elijah the prophet in the OT was being hunted down by wicked Queen Jezebel who wanted everyone to worship her god called Baal. He felt he was all alone in resisting her. Turn to p361, 1 *Kings* 19.10... But it wasn't true. Elijah saw only part of the picture. Look now at v18... There were 7,000!

When you're having a bad time in your life, do you wonder why? What's going on? Where is God? But we see only our small corner, not the bigger picture, and God is indeed moving in mysterious ways. As St Paul said, 'Now we see through a glass darkly ... *now I know in part*'. Cornelius didn't know that God was preparing the way for his meeting with Peter. Peter didn't know why God sent him that weird vision at that time. It was only later that it all came together. God does indeed move in mysterious ways, and we must trust he knows what he's doing.

I want to finish now with a little verse. It's not great poetry, but it speaks of our limited human vision. Look at a piece of tapestry; on the back we see only rough, untidy threads, but on the front a masterpiece!

My life is but a weaving, between my God and me.
I do not choose the colours, He worketh steadily.
Oftimes He weaveth sorrow, and I in foolish pride,
forget He sees the upper, and I the underside.