

“CORNELIUS”

Acts 10:23-28

Well, here we are – a baptism service. And some of you here this morning may well be wondering what on earth this is all about. In fact, you’re actually rather surprised to find yourself here – here, in a church, singing songs and listening to prayers and Bible readings. Well, fair enough – maybe that’s not too far beyond the realms of possibility: but these three people are going to be baptised! They are going to climb down into this pool and go under the water as part of some apparently arcane ritual of Christian initiation. Well, someone invited you along to see this this morning and you were just too curious or too polite to refuse.

In that case, the story we just read of a Roman officer called Cornelius may well ring a few bells for you. This is a man who would have fitted in very well in a place like Lichfield. He was an outwardly good man, as we read in the early part of the chapter. He gave to charity, he kept his nose clean, he conformed to the institutional religion of the area where he was posted, and he seems to have had a vague awareness that there was something a bit more to life than the totally material. But something happened to him that was to change his life radically. God began to show him that there was something about life that was a bit more dynamic than that which he had experienced up until then. Cornelius was looking for something more.

That’s a good place to start, I suppose – feeling that life isn’t just about plodding through the week with all the burdens and problems of work and family life. It’s not just about *coping* with things: there is something more satisfying, more fulfilling, more real, if only you could just put your finger on it. And when Cornelius began to think about it, he knew he had to do something about it. So let’s send a few minutes reflecting on what happened to him.

1. HE WAS INTERESTED (v22)

Cornelius was interested in what Peter had to say. He’d obviously heard of Peter and seemed to feel that, through Peter and what he was saying, he would be able to get some idea of what it was that he needed, what it was that he had this deep, almost inarticulate desire for. So he decided to send for him. I guess he did so out of curiosity – here’s something to think about: maybe it’ll work, maybe it won’t, but we’ll give it a whirl.

Is that like you? Not too interested in any commitment at the moment? Not wanting to be under any obligation? Fair enough. But, like Cornelius, don’t rule out the possibility. In a bit you’ll hear what

Colin, Elias and Selina have to say – and they're ordinary people, not stupid, pretty stable on the whole, but they've had their curiosity satisfied. They're not daft or impressionable – and nor are the rest of us here this morning who have made the decision that eventually Cornelius did.

2. **HE LISTENED** (vv34-43)

When Peter arrived at Cornelius's house, he stood up and began to explain the message of Christianity – or The Way, as it was then known. He was passionately committed to it – so much so that he eventually died for his belief in it. I'm passionately committed to it – I spend my life trying to make it a bit more widely known and practised. Elias, Selina and Colin are passionately committed to it – you'd have to be to agree to go through this on a cold December's morning in front of a couple of hundred people.

And Peter, this powerful advocate of the teaching of Jesus Christ, told Cornelius and all his family and staff about the Gospel, the good news about Jesus Christ and what he had come to do. Peter had spent three years with this man, he had seen him in action, he had seen him executed, he had seen him after he had been brought back to life. He told his audience about the certainty of judgement, the need for forgiveness and finally, in v43, about the need to believe in what God has already done and respond to his call. Jesus' death was now in the past and God's plan to give all people the opportunity to be part of that plan – to escape the unpleasant consequences of our wrong decisions and wrong attitudes and actions and to participate in the life of his Kingdom – that plan was now complete. All that was now needed was for Cornelius, for us, for anyone to respond to the initiative that God had taken by putting their trust in him.

3. **GOD WORKED** (v44)

As Cornelius began to accept what Peter was saying, something strange started to happen. God began to work by his Holy Spirit in the lives of all those who were listening. The Holy Spirit was transforming him. It was, if you like, a visible manifestation of the invisible work that was going on inside him. Cornelius realised the truth of what Peter was saying to him about Jesus. He could see that it somehow made sense. And as he accepted that personally, his whole being was filled with praise to God.

God's working here this morning, I believe. He is speaking to people here – encouraging some in what they already believe, filling some with an inexplicable sense of wonder, challenging some about their own response to what is going on. If you sense something like that happening to you during this service, don't

fight it or put it down to emotionalism or group dynamics or whatever – allow God’s Holy Spirit to work in your life, and pray that he keeps on doing it.

4. **HE OBEYED**

What had happened deep inside Cornelius’s heart and mind was obviously something very personal – God was speaking to **HIM**, in his situation, with all his personal hang-ups and experiences. There was a change deep within his being. But it couldn’t stay inside!

Cornelius – and all the rest of his household – started to praise God. And he had to obey God, to live his life in obedience to God’s ways, as part of his response to him. The most immediate outward sign of that obedience was that he was baptised. Cornelius responded to Peter’s suggestion that they should witness to the change in their lives by being baptised, just as Jesus had commanded. And let me just say that I believe it is a command in the New Testament – it’s not a suggestion as to something you might like to do: it’s a mark of obedience to the message of the Gospel.

But that wasn’t the end of the story for those new Roman Christians. Although we don’t read of them again in the Bible, they would have gone on to develop in their new-found faith and get involved in the work of the church wherever Cornelius was posted. And this morning isn’t the end for Selina, Elias and Colin. This isn’t a graduation ceremony. They are not suddenly released from grind of everyday life, suddenly able to do as they want – three new Super-Christians who are several rungs higher up the ladder to glory than the rest of us. James, another of the New Testament writers, a leader in the church in Jerusalem and the brother of Jesus, tells us that we need to show our belief in God not just in a quaint little ceremony in a church in front of a few like-minded believers, but in every area of our lives – at work, in the community, in the gym, down the pub, amongst the neighbours, in our families.

When, like Cornelius, you recognise your need of God, when you accept what he has done for you, when you respond with praise and worship to God’s call to live his way, that will certainly revolutionise your whole outlook of life, give you a new perspective on things, transform your attitudes and then your behaviour. If you’re curious about all that this morning, don’t stay curious – have a chat with someone about it. We actually have some groups in this church specifically for those who are wanting to find out a bit more – no obligation of commitment. If you think you might be getting close to what this is all about, there’s no better time to take the final step.

The choice is yours – take it or leave it. But think very, very carefully before you decide to leave it – it might be for ever.