

## SERMON FOR EPIPHANY (Cape Town - 6 January 2008)

**Text:** *(Peter was in Joppe in the house of Simon the tanner. On the rooftop he had a vision, God commanding him to eat animals deemed to be unclean. As he was still reflecting on the meaning of the vision, God commanded him to go down as three men were waiting for him....)* <sup>21</sup> [Peter] said to the men "I'm the one you're looking for. Why have you come?" <sup>22</sup> The men replied, "We have come from Cornelius the centurion. He is a righteous and God-fearing man, who is respected by all the Jewish people. A holy angel told him to have you come to his house so that he could hear what you have to say." .... <sup>23</sup> the next day Peter started out with them ... (and) <sup>24</sup> arrived in Caesarea. Cornelius was expecting them and had called together his relatives and close friends. <sup>25</sup> As Peter entered the house, Cornelius met him and fell at his feet in reverence. <sup>26</sup> But Peter made him get up. "Stand up," he said, "I am only a man myself." <sup>27</sup> ... He said to them: "You are well aware that it is against our law for a Jew to associate with a Gentile or visit him. But God has shown me that I should not call any man impure or unclean. <sup>29</sup> So when I was sent for, I came without raising any objection. May I ask why you sent for me?" <sup>30</sup> Cornelius answered: "Four days ago I was in my house praying at this hour, at three in the afternoon. Suddenly a man in shining clothes stood before me <sup>32</sup>... (and said): Send to Joppa for Simon who is called Peter... <sup>33</sup> So I sent for you immediately, and 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." <sup>34</sup> Then Peter began to speak: "I now realize how true it is that God does not show favoritism <sup>35</sup> but accepts men from every nation who fear him and do what is right. (Acts 10:21-35)

We are celebrating a very important festival today, called Epiphany. Because it follows immediately after Christmas, we don't usually hold it in high regard. Some of you may have come to this service this morning not even realising that are we holding a "festive" service today.

Festive services are always services with "special" meaning. There is a message to be heard today - a message, that is not only important, but is foundational for our faith. In other words, if we miss the point today, we will overlook a central aspect of our Christian faith.

The topic of the Sunday is "Christ, the Lord of all". This was already stressed in the Gospel reading we heard. It was that well-known story of the Magi that came all the way from the East to worship the king that was born in Bethlehem. There is a reason why this story is told so early in the Gospel of Matthew. Right from the outset, already at the birth of Jesus, it was to be made clear, that the saviour born in Bethlehem was not only a saviour for the Jews, but for all. The Magi came from Mesopotamia. From a Jewish perspective that was a "heathen" country. No Jew would ever associate with them. But drawn by a heavenly star these heathens are amongst the first to kneel at the manger of Jesus and worship him as their king.

But for the ordinary Jews the thought, that the saviour is there for "all", was so, so difficult to grasp. Maybe they did grasp it on an intellectual level. Already very early in the Old Testament God makes a promise to Abraham: "***And all peoples on earth will be blessed through you***"

(Gen.12:3). God wants to use “his people” to reach “others”. The Jews knew it, but it was not something they exercised in a practical way. In practise God was “their” God and Jesus “their” saviour. As long as “they” were saved, they were content.

But slowly God took them on a teaching journey and one barrier after the next were crossed.

The first barrier crossed was to the Samaritans. When Peter held that inaugural sermon on the day of Pentecost in Jerusalem, he still addressed the crowd as: “*Fellow Jews and all of you who live in Jerusalem*” (Acts 2:14). The Jews were his focus. But soon afterwards a persecution broke out in Jerusalem. The Jewish Christians crossed the boarder to Samaria. And there they experienced that “Samaritans” were accepted by God. They were filled with the holy Spirit.

But the next barrier to cross, was even more difficult. Samaritans were at least half-Jews and shared the same Bible. But no Jew would ever even have contact with a heathen. In fact, there were laws that prevented it. As a Jew you would for example never share a meal or even enter the house of a heathen. The Jews feared contamination.

This is not quite as far fetched as we may think. In some way we do the same with our children. We have no laws in our house really. But I do think my children realise that I don’t like it if they party with friends who drink too much. In fact, I prefer them to have friends, of whom I know that they have high morals and go to church on regular basis.

The Jews didn’t associate with heathens, fearing an influence that may distract them from God and render them “unholy”, or “unclean”.

Notably, however (and this is key to this passage), it wasn’t Peter who one day decided: Let us cross the barrier. Let us go to the heathens. Let us go into their houses and eat with them! This idea never crossed his mind. The one who acted was God. “He” determined for whom his gospel is.

In our sermon text “God” is clearly the central figure. He prompts both Cornelius, the Greek centurion, and Peter, his main apostle, into action at the same time. First, there is an angel that appears to Cornelius. God gives him the message: In Joppe in the house of Simon the tanner, is a man called Simon Peter. Send men to fetch him! Cornelius doesn’t even know why he should fetch Peter. But he obeys.

And while the men are on the way to Joppe, Peter relaxing on the roof top also has a vision. He sees a large sheet descending from heaven with unclean animals on it, and he hears a command: “Get up, Peter. Kill and eat.” He doesn’t want to do. Eating unclean animals is against every strain in his body. But three times he hears the command: “Eat! And don’t call unclean what I have made clean.” And as Peter is still contemplating the meaning of the vision, Cornelius’ people arrive at the house. They inform Peter that an angel had appeared to Cornelius, telling him that he, Peter, had a message for him.

Peter in turn doesn’t even know what he is supposed to say to Cornelius. But there is a command

of God. And just like Cornelius, this time Peter obeys and marches off to the house of Cornelius, the heathen.

Why is it so important that we understand that “God” is acting? It is important because we need to understand: In presenting his salvation God, contrary to us, shows no favouritism. He doesn’t say: “I want you, *because* of this. I want you *because* of that”. God simply says: “You, I want you.” He did it to Israel initially. The Israelites weren’t “better” people than other nations. But God simply decided: “I want you”. Israel’s selection was pure grace. Nothing else counted. In the same way God says: “I want you... I want you... I want you...” And when this voice is heard, it is pure grace.

We need to understand that ourselves: We have not “right” to belong to God. We didn’t earn a calling from God. But if you heard his voice of love calling your name, it was pure grace. And the same grace that called you, calls the other person. God wants also the heathen to become part of his family.

The question is, whether we want it. If in any way we understood “grace”, then we would also want it for others what God wants for them. But we battle. We battle to cross that barrier. We are not different to what Peter initially was. When called by God to “eat”, the first thing he saw, were purity laws. There are laws about eating or not eating certain foods. And without doubt these laws were good and sensible laws in ancient times. And Peter just couldn’t see himself trampling on laws and customs that made perfect sense to him.

But God wants to save “people”. And when God calls a “person” all these laws and customs that determine our lives are subordinate to that calling.

We, of course, don’t have the problem of adhering to certain purity laws anymore. But we have our own unwritten laws and customs. We have our own way of doing things. And subconsciously we expect everybody else to fall into line. If they don’t, they are not really welcome.

The Psychologists speak of a “corporate skin” that covers every community of people. This skin makes it easy for some people to enter that community, but for others, with a different cultural or ethnic background, this skin keeps them away. And interestingly the more family orientated a community is, the more difficult it is for others to become part of that community.

But “God” shows no favouritism!. We ask: Where do you come from? What is your social standing? Do you understand Lutheran doctrine? Will you be able to contribute to the well-being of our church? Could you be a threat to our way of doing things? For God, all of these questions play no role at all.

In fact, in the Bible, showing favouritism, regarding some people more important than others, is attributed to corrupt judges. They look at the person. For God the key word is “grace”. Peter was saved by grace alone. Cornelius was saved by grace alone. For those “outside” it means: If you respond to the calling of this God, you don’t have to bring anything along. You just come as you are. What is unclean, God himself makes clean. And what God has made clean, we may not

regard as unclean.

In short, this passage communicates God's grace in reaching out to "others". It is about outreach. We often talk about outreach in our church. Sometimes we are motivated by our small size. We want our congregation to grow so that we will function better as a congregation. That is all rubbish. We reach out with the Gospel, because "God" commands us. One day he touches your heart and says: "I want you to go to that person". And then you go. Like Peter, you may not even know what to say. But when Peter was in the house of Cornelius God kindled a conversation. And it wasn't long before Peter could give witness of Jesus Christ, the one who died on the cross, the one who saves through faith by grace alone.

Or God may prompt another person to come to you. Or he may prompt somebody to visit our congregation. And again, as that person arrives, God may be touching your heart saying: "Talk to that person". And you do, not because you are gifted in making conversation, or because that person fits into the mould of what you may visualize to be a prospective good Christian, somebody like us. But you talk, because God, who shows no favouritism, tells you to do so.

This is how the Gospel spread throughout the world. God touched the heart of people and said: "I want you, and you, and you." And those who had been touched by God's grace before, responded when sent. They crossed the barrier and experienced the God whose love encompasses all people.

As a church, this is, what we should radiate: Grace! Customs may be a natural phenomenon of "every" community. But when it comes to saving "people" and when it comes to "God's Kingdom", they are always subordinate to grace. God wants all people to be saved. That is the bottom line. Amen.