

Sunday 19th May 2019 What are we willing to give to God?
Acts 11:1-18 Rev 21:1-6 John 13:31-35

Intro:

The last time I was really reading and thinking about the disciple Peter was on Good Friday when he hid from people and denied 3 times knowing Jesus. The same man who had jumped out of the boat and walked on water towards Jesus.

And now we read this wonderful story of how he put aside so much in order to draw alongside the Gentiles and share his amazing story of Jesus with them.

The message of our reading from Acts is almost a duplicate of that told in chapter 10

Peter is a good Jewish believer and he goes to visit a man called Cornelius.

Cornelius is a Roman centurion. A Gentile. And other Gentiles were gathered in his house.

It was against the Jewish Law for Jews to associate with Gentiles, never mind visit with a group of them. (10:28) But God had shown Peter that he must no longer call any man impure or unclean so he went and talked with them.

At the start of our reading today he had already upset some of the other converted Jewish believers and was being criticised for mixing with the Gentiles (11:2) and for eating with them. He was criticised for exactly what he had been unsure about until God had given him a vision. It was against the law for Jews to associate with Gentiles.

There were also strict laws about what Jewish believers should and should not eat

If you want to know more read Leviticus especially chapters 11 and 20

These chapters very clearly set out what animals and birds of the air and creatures of the sea could and should not be eaten

For example - animals with split hoof AND chew the cud could be eaten but it has to be both /and.

Camels & rabbits should not be eaten because they chew the cud but do not have split hooves

Pigs should not be eaten because they have split hooves but do not chew the cud

Cows have both and could be eaten

Deuteronomy 14 reinforces the commands of Leviticus.

Peter knew well the expectations of the law and it was important for him to uphold the law.

Leviticus 20:25 & 26 make it clear

You must therefore make a distinction between clean and unclean animals and between unclean and clean birds. Do not defile yourselves by any animal or bird or anything that moves along the ground - those which I have set apart as unclean for you.

You are to be holy to me because I the Lord am holy, and I have set you apart from the nations to be my own.

The issue of what to eat was not just a preferred way of eating, or a recent fad. It was an issue of holiness for Peter according to the Old Law.

And yet when God called and asked him to go to the gentile home of Cornelius, Peter was willing to give up all that he had learned and revered.

He was willing to give up his previous way of doing things and forsake his preferences in order to surrender and be obedient to God.

I wonder what we are willing to give to God?

There is a wonderful story that a man called Tony Campolo tells of one night when he had arrived in Honolulu. Because of the time difference he was wide awake and hungry at 3am and so went out in search of something to eat and drink.

This is how the story goes

Up a side street I found a little place that was still open. I went in, took a seat on one of the stools at the counter, and waited to be served. This was one of those sleazy places that deserves the name, "greasy spoon." I did not even touch the menu. I was afraid that if I opened the thing something gruesome would crawl out. But it was the only place I could find.

The fat guy behind the counter came over and asked me, "What d'ya want?"

I said I wanted a cup of coffee and a donut.

He poured a cup of coffee, wiped his grimy hand on his smudged apron, and then he grabbed a donut off the shelf behind him.

As I sat there munching on my donut and sipping my coffee at 3:30 in the morning, the door of the diner suddenly swung open and, to my discomfort, in marched eight or nine provocative and boisterous prostitutes.

It was a small place, and they sat on either side of me. Their talk was loud and crude. I felt completely out of place and was just about to make my getaway when I overheard the woman beside me say, "Tomorrow's my birthday. I'm going to be 39."

Her "friend" responded in a nasty tone, "So what do you want from me? A birthday party? What do you want? Ya want me to get you a cake and sing 'Happy Birthday'?"

"Come on," said the woman sitting next to me. "Why do you have to be so mean? I was just telling you, that's all. Why do you have to put me down? I was just telling you it was my birthday. I don't want anything from you. I mean, why should you give me a birthday party? I've never had a birthday party in my whole life. Why should I have one now?"

When I heard that, I made a decision. I sat and waited until the women had left. Then I called over the fat guy behind the counter, and I asked him, "Do they come in here every night?"

"Yeah!" he answered.

"The one right next to me, does she come here every night?"

"Yeah!" he said. "That's Agnes. Yeah, she comes in here every night. Why d'ya wanta know?"

"Because I heard her say that tomorrow is her birthday," I told him. "What do you say you and I do something about that? What do you think about us throwing a birthday party for her—right here—tomorrow night?"

A cute smile slowly crossed his chubby cheeks, and he answered with measured delight, "That's great! I like it! That's a great idea!" Calling to his wife, who did the cooking in the back room, he shouted, "Hey! Come out here! This guy's got a great idea. Tomorrow's Agnes's birthday. This guy wants us to go in with him and throw a birthday party for her—right here—tomorrow night!"

His wife came out of the back room all bright and smiley. She said, "That's wonderful! You know Agnes is one of those people who is really nice and kind, and nobody does anything nice and kind for her."

"Look," I told them, "if it's okay with you, I'll get back here tomorrow morning about 2:30 and decorate the place. I'll even get a birthday cake!"

"No way," said Harry (that was his name). "The birthday cake's my thing. I'll make the cake."

At 2:30 the next morning, I was back at the diner. I had picked up some crepe-paper decorations at the store and had made a sign out of big pieces of cardboard that read, "Happy Birthday, Agnes!" I decorated the diner from one end to the other. I had that diner looking good.

The woman who did the cooking must have gotten the word out on the street, because by 3:15 every prostitute in Honolulu was in the place. It was wall-to-wall prostitutes and me!

At 3:30 on the dot, the door of the diner swung open, and in came Agnes and her friend. I had everybody ready and when they came in we all screamed, "Happy birthday!"

Never have I seen a person so flabbergasted, so stunned, so shaken. Her mouth fell open. Her legs seemed to buckle a bit. Her friend grabbed her arm to steady her. As she was led to sit on one of the stools along the counter, we all sang "Happy Birthday" to her.

If you want to find out what happened you will need to look up Tony Campolo Party for Prostitutes on Youtube

It might sound easy in this story but think what this man was giving up for God
Not just the inconvenience of losing sleep for another night
Or the cost of the things he bought for the party - that was probably quite minimal
But potentially his reputation - middle aged man, a sociologist, a well known preacher, sitting in a greasy spoon cafe full of prostitutes.
His dignity His comfort
All sorts of things he was prepared to give up
And I think he was able to do this because actually, he had given his heart to God.
Really, deeply surrendered everything to Him So that when he heard Agnes first talk about her birthday, his heart was already soft and willing and surrendered to give of his time and money and reputation to love and bless Agnes in such a way.

Why? Why did Tony Campolo do it? Why did Peter do what he did in going to eat and talk with Cornelius and his friends?

Maybe because they had already given everything to God. They had surrendered all of their lives to Him

So when men sent by Cornelius came and asked Peter to go to his house, Peter was willing
When Tony Campolo was sitting in the cafe and heard Agnes speak, he felt the urge to bless her
They wanted to show the love of God to others and tell them the Good News of Jesus
Because Jesus gave up everything for them and they wanted to give everything back to Him.

We are just 4 weeks after Easter when we remembered how Jesus gave up EVERYTHING for us.
His authority, his dignity, his purity, his safety, his power, his life
Jesus gave up everything for us because he loves us.
And he tells us we are to love others as He loved us.

In our reading from John Jesus commands His disciples, and therefore us if we are to be disciples of Him, we are to love one another. That wasn't a new command. We can read it also in Leviticus, this time in chapter 19.

But Jesus added to this command, to his disciples, to love one another ... just as Jesus has loved us.

And to do this we need to give EVERYTHING to Him

Our time, money, security, dignity, reputation, desires, hobbies, family, emotions, friendships ... you fill in the gap

Because when we do, we find ultimate freedom because there is no better place, no safer place, no more peaceful place, no more exciting place to be than being totally surrendered to God.

It's a huge ask. But what is God asking us, you and me, to give to Him today
Have we completely given Him everything. Because if we claim that He is Lord of our lives then we need to let Him be exactly that. Lord of all. And we need to give all of ourself to Him.
What might you need to give to God today?

PAUSE

Today we are going to collect in the pledge forms that I hope you have had a chance to think and pray about and prepare for today.

I don't want this to detract from the message I have just shared but I think it goes hand in hand.

Maybe one of the things we need to give up to God is our money, our finances?

At the APCM I explained that we need to replace our church windows. We are fortunate to be able to come and worship in this lovely church week by week but the windows now need replacing and the cost will be about £96,000

If you haven't seen one of these blue letters please take one today and after some prayer please return the pledge form at the bottom.

In a moment we are going to collect in those that you have brought back with you. If you have already given them in then they are already in the baskets

Money that we are pledging to give back to God so that the windows can be replaced and the mission and ministry of God continue in this place

So let us pray what God is asking of us
pledge forms for His mission