

Throughout the Easter season our first reading each week has been from the Acts of the Apostles. We have heard stories of the increase in the number of believers. We heard of people's lives transformed as they heard the Word of God and were baptised. We also heard of the challenges that they faced and of their confidence in God in the face of those challenges. As we come towards the end of the Easter season and as we approach the feast of Pentecost, our readings are focusing more on the presence and activity of the Holy Spirit.

Today's first reading from the Acts of the Apostles is all about the Holy Spirit. It is part of a larger story of Saint Peter meeting the centurion Cornelius, who was a pagan, but also a devout man. It was an unlikely meeting as neither of them would have had anything in common. But what becomes clear when we look at the whole story, is that this is a meeting that was engineered by God. One afternoon, Cornelius has a vision in which an angel tells him to send some of his staff to a certain town to seek out Peter. The following day, Peter also had a vision. It was about midday, and he was praying, but he began to feel hungry and saw a strange vision of a tablecloth coming from heaven with food on it. But it was food that Jews considered profane and unclean. Then he heard a voice telling him to eat the food. He protested that he would never eat anything that was unclean. But the voice came back at him and told him that what God has made clean, he was not to call unclean. Then the food disappeared. I guess Peter thought nothing more about it until the men sent by Cornelius arrived. He probably would not normally have taken much notice of them, except that the Holy Spirit urged him to go with them to the house of Cornelius, where no doubt that food like that Peter had seen in the vision would have been on the dinner table.

We heard what happened when he arrived. He recognised that this pagan, Cornelius, had received the gift of the Holy Spirit. Peter declared to those at the house that he recognised now that belonging to God was not limited to any particular race or nationality. The message that Jesus had preached was for the whole world. That day, Peter saw among those people gathered in that house the marvellous working of the Holy Spirit. And the people in Peter's group who had accompanied him to the house of Cornelius were astonished that the gift of the Holy Spirit should be poured out on pagans.

I think we shouldn't underestimate how important this event was in the life of the early church and for the future of the Christian religion. We, of course, take it for granted, because we are all the beneficiaries of this marvellous event. We also shouldn't underestimate how difficult it was for Peter and the earliest disciples to accept what had happened. Openness to pagans was not within their way of thinking; it hadn't been part of their previous experience. Acting against some of the Old Testament laws around clean and unclean food was something, as Peter said, that they could never have imagined themselves to be allowed to do.

How was it possible that Peter was able to reach this point? I think there are two things that we need to note. The first concerns the role of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit kept prodding Peter, leading him step by step until he was able to recognise that the Spirit could even act outside the normal places where Peter was accustomed to see the work of the Spirit. The thing to know about the Spirit is that we can't control the Spirit. As St John's gospel tells us, the Spirit blows where it wills. It is like the wind: we can't see it, but we can feel its effects. The Spirit is likely to surprise us.

The second point to note about Peter's recognition is more concrete and touches the human situation he experienced. It was the encounter with Cornelius that was important. Cornelius greeted him as a person with great honour. Cornelius recognised him as someone who intimately knew Jesus and his message. But Peter also had the humility to learn from this encounter with Cornelius. The temptation was surely to walk away or to close the door for any further encounter, but Peter remained open. The reward of his openness was the joy of seeing the Spirit work marvels among that household – where he least expected to see it.

There is a lesson for us in this story. It is to always remain open to Holy Spirit's touching of our lives in ways that we may never have imagined. The Holy Spirit is the Spirit of Jesus who loves us and calls us friends. As Jesus reminded us in the gospel: he chose us, we didn't choose him. In choosing us, he anointed us with his Spirit so that we might bear fruit. The fruit that we bear is to love others as Jesus loves us.