

# Peter and Cornelius

Notes for 13 May

*Steve Logan*

Read: [Acts 10:1-11:18](#)

Today's story of Cornelius and Peter, of two visions and two long walks, is so good it is told twice.

Chapter 10 tells of Cornelius and his mid-afternoon vision, in which God tells him to send for Peter. The next day we get Peter's vision of the sheet or sailcloth coming down from the sky, full of animals of all descriptions, with the instruction to eat them - regardless of their clean/unclean status. And to reinforce whatever point is being made, Peter gets that vision three times. Right on cue, the envoys from Cornelius arrive and plans are made to return to Caesarea the next day. Back they go, walking the 50+km to Caesarea.

Peter meets Cornelius, a sermon is delivered, the Holy Spirit is received, and baptisms happen.

Chapter 11 recounts Peter telling the church in Jerusalem the story again. A story that confronts the Jewish exclusiveness in such a way that, at the end of his telling, "they stopped objecting and began praising God. They said, 'We can see that God has also given the Gentiles the privilege of repenting of their sins and receiving eternal life.'" (v11:18).

To get straight to the conclusion of the story let me quote Stott...

*"The fundamental emphasis of the Cornelius story is that, since God does not make distinctions in his new society, we have no liberty to make them either. Yet, tragic as it is, the church has never learned irrevocably the truth of its own unity or of the equality of its members in Christ. Even Peter himself, despite the fourfold divine witness he had received, later had a bad lapse in Antioch, withdrew from fellowship with believing Gentiles, and had to be publicly opposed by Paul. Even then, the circumcision party continued their propaganda, and the Council of Jerusalem had to be called to settle the issue (Acts 15). Even after that, the same ugly sin of discrimination has kept reappearing in the church, in the form of racism (colour prejudice), nationalism ('my country, right or wrong'), tribalism in Africa and casteism in India, social and cultural snobbery, or sexism (discriminating against women). All such discrimination is inexcusable even in non-Christian society; in the Christian community it is both an obscenity (because offensive to human dignity) and a blasphemy (because offensive to God who accepts without discrimination all who repent and believe). Like Peter, we have to learn that 'God does not show favouritism' (v10:34)."*

["The Message of Acts"](#), part of "The Bible Speaks" series, John Stott, p.197

Phew!

As we view this story, which we've all heard a hundred times, how can we cut through our own smugness? *We* know it's fine to enter the house of a non-believer, *we* know better than *them*.

I recently finished listening to the podcast series ["The Witch Trials of J.K. Rowling"](#). Nominally the subject is that of Rowling's well-known arguments with Twitter opponents on the nature of being a woman. What raises the series well above the usual podcast fare is that the fact that the interviewer is [Megan Phelps-Roper](#), formerly of the notorious [Westboro Baptist Church](#). So, rather than a straightforward discussion on trans issues the series morphs into an introspective analysis of 'what if I'm wrong?'. Phelps-Roper, with her tremendous backstory - an almost

Saul/Paul-like Damascene conversion from a Westboro Baptist Church zealot to what we'd all recognise as a 'normal' person - asks the hardest of hard questions. "How do I know that I'm right?"

I think Peter had to go through that sort of experience. An experience that culminates in the story we're covering today.

Do we have the courage to examine ourselves and identify our own deep-rooted prejudices and admit that we might be wrong? And that God might be telling us something different?

Bring your thoughts to the class...

## **Additional reading**

I find Megan Phelps-Roper and her story fascinating. I thoroughly recommend her book, ['Unfollow'](#). Parts of it will be horribly familiar to those of us who have had to engage with religious fundamentalism. If you are quick, you can find an abridged audiobook version on the [BBC web site](#).

See also ['At 5, She Protested Homosexuality. Now She Protests the Church That Made Her Do It.'](#) a review in the New York Times of 'Unfollow'.