

## Bennochy church: 6th August 2017

I wonder if you can think of an example, something that has happened to you, where an event, a conversation has really grab's your attention? Something that has made stop what you have been doing and made you think? I mean really think. A long standing view is challenged. A cherished notion that begins to change.

For society today, what was once held as true, is no longer the case. Truth evolves. Think about emancipation, civil rights, gender equality. They are not the finished articles, but who would wish to return back to a time when life's choices were so dependent on what family you were born into, what the colour of your skin was or, your gender or your sexuality. There were moments in history, when truth dawned, and courageous people challenged the system. *"I have a dream, a man once said."* That dream, and many others, are still there to be fulfilled.

Peter was a Jew, through and through. He did not get the Gentile bit. Those words of Jesus, that understanding that all people were equal in the sight of God, that had not yet seeped into his consciousness. He needed something to stop him in his tracks and challenge his long held religious views. So God does a bit of manoeuvring and sets up an encounter that would change everything for Peter. This is a momentous event in Peter's life. If

he was not going to change his views by himself. Peter required an almighty prod by God.

This is a story of 'double-vision'. We don't need to understand, how the visions happened for these two men. Was Peter asleep? Was it a dream? Was there a deliberate link in the story between him feeling hungry and God's command to eat? These things not important

The Jews had this elaborate set of dietary regulations. The details are not important. All we need to know, is that what was in the sheet in Peter's vision, was deemed unclean and could not be eaten. What is key here is the impact upon Peter in what God is asking him to do. It is seismic! It rips up everything that Peter understands about the Jewish law and about what God had commanded, on what they could and could not eat. At best, Peter thought this is, impious. At worst, disgusting!

It is difficult to put a comparison into words. It might be like God saying to us, I want you to deliberately break the law. Think of what you would least do and you are kind of in Peter's shoes. I am pretty certain you would join with Peter in saying, *"certainly not, Lord!"* No way! Maybe Peter did not put it as politely as that! He was hungry, but he was not that hungry! And just to make the point. This vision happened three times.

It is interesting to speculate and I wonder just how many times we have done this as a church throughout history. Believe

something to be true and then God, the very basis of our truth, says, you know what, you have got it wrong. What Peter understood as truth, was sincerely held, was just about to meet its greatest challenge. While he is wondering what has just happened to him and what it all means, some visitors arrive. Sent by Cornelius, a Roman captain. This sets the cat among the pigeons.

Whether Cornelius was a good man or not, that is incidental. The thing is, he is not a Jew. He is the same as the unclean animals in the sheet in the vision. That is the real challenge now facing Peter. Now he knows what the vision was all about. The rubber is now firmly hitting the road. Forget religious theory, this encounter is now for him reality. What does he do next? Jews were not meant to enter a Gentiles house or entertain non Jews in their own, but here is the big prod from the Spirit of God to Peter. In spite of what you believe, God is asking you to change. Welcome these messengers and go to the home of Cornelius. Which is exactly what he did. At home, read on to the end of Acts chapter 10 and see what happened.

We have totally lost the impact of this story and how much Peter is going to have to change, and move from his sincerely held religious views. Society throws huge challenges like that at the church all the time, and there is always the debate about whether these challenges are prods from God or is the church simply following the ways of the world. The Church of Scotland

for example, was one of the first churches to ordain women to the ministry. We should be proud of that. At the moment we are still debating issues around human sexuality. Down through the centuries God has lowered and will continue to lower different 'sheets' before our eyes, and will challenge us with these words, *"do not consider anything unclean that God has declared clean."*

If we are to believe that God's love overflows into all of his creation, then God will always be pushing the boundaries of his love and compassion is , in our lives. Peter, to accept those who he understood as unclean, like Cornelius, and for us, to welcome the stranger, have compassion for the unlovable and to love even our enemies. These are the kind of people, who I think are 'in our sheets', that God lowers and places before our eyes.

In this story, Peter had an instant challenge. He did not have much time to think about and it is an encounter that challenges our own deeply held views, on the life choices and lifestyles of others.

This story says, it is God, and not us, who determines what is clean and unclean in his creation. That is part of the gospel. God's love enters where there is hatred. God's peace, enters where there is strife and God's hope, creates a world in God's image. All are equal and all are welcome. Amen.