

Bennochy church 8th July 2018

A taboo is defined as "*proscribed by society as improper or unacceptable*". We all have got our taboos. Those things, for different reasons, we will not do. . That line in the sand we will not cross. We sometimes impose our taboos on others; our families, in the work place and we might even have congregational taboos, that are part and parcel of our church culture, that's 'the way we do things around here'.

We can inherit our taboos, in the way we have been brought up and from the culture round about us. In one culture something might be deemed acceptable and in another be frowned upon, or in another, it is made illegal. Some taboos are assumed. They are unwritten rules about how things are done here. That can lead to problems, if someone comes in from outside that culture, or congregation, and doesn't know the 'house rules' ! Other taboos are proscribed in law. If you want to be part of our society, you just don't do that.

By the time we find Peter on the roof top in Joppa, it was a common place for drying vegetables and daily prayer, and he has this vision of the animals in the sheet, the people of Israel had lots of taboos. They had the written laws of God and all the regulations they had created around them. To prevent them breaking a law, they created another one to 'ring fence' it off, to make absolutely sure that law would not be broken.

This story crosses a major divide between Jewish and Gentile culture. In that sense Acts 10 is pivotal. Not just for Peter, but for the future mission of the church. It is all about what could and could not be eaten. Peter is feeling hungry and so it is no surprise that his vision, his dream, is about food. When you are hungry, what do you think about? When is the worst time to shop - when you are hungry! The problem for Peter is this. This vision comes from God. These animals, reptiles and birds are described as coming down from heaven, but not any old animals, reptiles and birds, they are taboo for Peter to eat. If he eats them, he will become ritually unclean, and no self respecting Jew is going to do that. It would be a Rubicon never to cross.

Kosher foods are those that conform to the Jewish dietary regulations, primarily derived from the books of Leviticus and Deuteronomy. It derives from a Hebrew word meaning "fit". In this context, fit for consumption. The detail of the laws are not important, but this sheet is filled with non Kosher food.

The whole vision is ironic. God law that had said for centuries, don't eat these creatures, God is now saying to Peter, '*get up, kill and eat*'. As you might imagine, Peter is indignant. 'Not a chance', he says! 'I'm not that hungry!' Does he not know this is God speaking? He is clearly confused, and God's explanation does not seem to help. 'Listen Peter, who made all these

animals in the first place?' This vision happens three times, and the sheet with its animals is then taken back up into heaven.

While he is pondering what the vision is actually all about, Peter doesn't know that God's story, challenging what he believed, had already begun. Luke is saying, there are no coincidences here. This is all being guided by God.

The other man in the story is Cornelius. He is a Gentile and captain of the Italian regiment. It is 3 o'clock, a Jewish time of prayer, and he also has a vision. The story is a pains to point out Cornelius's religious credentials. He worships God. Probably seen as a righteous Gentile who had not been circumcised. He helps the Jewish poor and importantly, he recognises his vision as coming from God.

There is the possibility that Cornelius had heard Philip speak. He was the man who baptised the Ethiopian Official in Acts 8. Philip was resident in Caesarea. Maybe inspired by this, when he heard that Peter was in Joppa, he invites Peter to come and speak to his friends.

We are talking here about divisions. Not only was Cornelius a Gentile, he was also a Roman officer, who would at one point, would have pledged his allegiance to the emperor. There were those in the early church, who would therefore have had nothing at all to do with a man like Cornelius.

So we have two men. Two visions - title should have been "double vision". There are two barriers and one dramatic encounter to come.

The men sent by Cornelius have to travel about 30 miles to Joppa. They seem to do it very quickly, arriving by noon. There is a sense of urgency here. They shout out their arrival and immediately Peter has a problem. Jews were not meant to let Gentiles into their house or visit the house of Gentiles.

Peter's vision was not about Cornelius. It was about himself and here he does not have time to think. This vision did not just cross divides it literally opened doors. When Peter eventually arrives at the house of Cornelius he says, *"You yourselves know very well that a Jew is not allowed by his religion to visit or associate with Gentiles. But God has shown me that I must not consider any person ritually unclean or defiled."* That sums it up. Peter is now a bridge builder.

What happened, and you can read the rest of the story later, was way beyond the expectations of both Cornelius and Peter, but not God's. Not God's. That is the point. Peter, in his position of authority, crosses the divide, and it would cause him problems later on! We have lost the impact of what is happening here. These are giant steps of faith.

There are places we will not go. There are people we will not meet. That is not the way of God. He says to all of us, make

those uncomfortable journeys. Span the bridge of our taboos
and recognise in the other, the face of Christ. Amen.