

Come Holy Spirit, Come Holy Spirit fill our church, Come Holy Spirit fill our hearts, Come Holy Spirit fill our City with the power of your love.

I watched the film “The Shack” again a few weeks ago. It’s a film about a man’s encounter with God and with pain, it’s about forgiveness and hope. The film is based on a book that was a little controversial, as all good books are. In the film God is embodied by a middle aged black woman, Jesus by a young Jewish man and the Holy Spirit by a 30ish Asian woman. I love the way those images play with our expectations. The book is not suggesting that God is a middle aged black woman as such, at another time God is portrayed by an older white man. The aim is to remind us that God is Spirit, and while Jesus was incarnated as a male – God is neither male nor female, neither young nor old, neither black nor white and in fact God is neither Jewish nor Gentile.

As we start this morning I want to ask you to take a moment and reach into your subconscious and look, ‘what does your image of God look like?’

We are four weeks into a series “Chasing the Spirit”, seeking to understand more about God the Holy Spirit. Keith reminded us last week, that the Spirit is not a force, but a person who has intention and purpose. The Spirit was poured out at Pentecost, meaning more available to all of us as believers in Jesus, and more around us among people who do not yet recognise Jesus.

In our first week we looked at the Spirit as a Spirit of Communication, the part of the Trinity who facilitates communication between Heaven and Earth. You might remember, ‘God gets You’, meaning God speaks your hearts language. On the day of Pentecost when the Spirit was poured out there was a miracle of tongues where the disciples declared God’s praise in many languages, so that many people could hear God’s call in their mother tongues.

Then we looked at the Spirit as the Spirit of Healing, healing a man born lame outside the temple. You might remember Peter and John’s words – ‘Silver and gold have I none, but what I have I give to you’. I’ve been reflecting that sometimes our silver and gold can get in the way of our receiving and flowing in the Spirit. Jesus encourages us to pray for healing by his Spirit.

Last week Keith picked up the theme and spoke about the Spirit being a deposit, God’s down-payment in our lives. I love that adoption image, of God putting his mark on us and whispering, ‘I’m glad that you’re my child’.

This week I want to describe another work of the Spirit, Jesus said, *‘But when he, the Spirit of truth, comes, he will guide you into all the truth.’* John 16.13. And so the Spirit keeps unveiling God’s plan for us. This can be at a personal level a new call on our lives, sometimes God leads us into a new area. This can be at a church level, perhaps God has a renewed vision for us or a new way for us to develop. This can also be at a cultural level, God is wanting to make changes in our civic culture.

Today, let’s talk about one of the great changes in Christian history, the change from a Jewish sect – to a Christianity that encompassed all nations, all gentiles.

We only read part of the story so let me surmise the whole.

There is a faithful Roman man Cornelius who has a vision from God telling him to visit Peter. Then Peter has a vision from God about unclean food, which conveys to him the idea that God’s salvation is for all people not just the Jews. More precisely the vision teaches Peter that, Gentiles can become Christians without needing to become Jews first. In Aotearoa New Zealand a parallel might be when the church overcame

Samuel Marsden's initial mission strategy of westernising Maori before Christianising them. This was an approach virtually all mission organisations would reject today. We were learning about Celtic Christianity last Wednesday night in Jesus the Game Changer.

Cornelius found Peter and invited him to visit – Peter makes the visit - breaking a Jewish cultural taboo – and then Peter shared with Cornelius the Good News and there was an outpouring of the Holy Spirit and everyone spoke in tongues. There was a visible sign that the Holy Spirit was endorsing Peter's action, a sign of God's inclusion of the Gentiles into Christ. (Again, Gentiles as Gentiles, not Gentiles who have first become Jews.)

Peter then went and defended his actions in Jerusalem - and there is a great expansion in the Mission. The word went out to all people, not just to Jews. Greeks and Romans could become Christians without first becoming Jews.

The rest of the New Testament answers the question, 'what is the ongoing role of the Jewish law for all Christians?' The answer is that we are saved through faith not through the works of the law, but there are some things that all Christians were encouraged to follow. Acts 15. 20. *Abstain from food polluted by idols, from sexual immorality, and from the meat of strangled animals and from blood.* But just the same as Gentile Christians, Jewish Christians did not need to give up being Jewish and their cultural identity to be Christians

Let's look at the centre of this story – as the Spirit lead the church into all truth.

* Let's start with Cornelius. He lived in Caesarea, by the coast in Israel. He was a Roman Soldier, an officer in the Italian regiment. He made his living as a Soldier. He and all his family were devout and God-fearing, (The phrase is the same that is used of Job – a man who feared God, Proverbs tells us that the Fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.) he gave generously to the poor and prayed to God regularly. Here are three characteristics of his life.

God-fearing meant that he honoured the God of Moses as a Gentile, he hadn't converted to Judaism, which would have required him to be circumcised and follow all 613 laws, and to give up his cultural identity. As a God-fearer he would have followed the moral code, he was attracted to Monotheism but he didn't give up his cultural identity. There were thousands of first century Gentiles attracted to Moses and to his vision of God.

He gave generously to those in need. He prayed to God regularly.

When Cornelius had his vision, there are two things that the Angel picked out, '*your prayers and your gifts to the poor*' – have come as a sweet offering before God. These things are valued by God like a sweet perfume.

Now the heart of our story was how the Spirit led Peter to bring about a huge change in who could be baptised, who could become a Christian? God-fearing Gentiles were a huge market for the Gospel, and Peter opened the door for them. How did the Spirit convince Peter? With a vision, a fulfilment and a demonstration.

* The Vision is a strange one. Peter was hungry and went up to pray and he had this vision of food that was considered ritually unclean come down to him. He refused it twice and then here is the key verse, '*Do not call anything unclean that God has made clean*'. That's the vision.

Then Peter experienced the Spirit telling him three men are coming looking for him, and this was fulfilled.

Thirdly, Peter met with Cornelius, and preached to him and the Spirit manifested in the Gentiles, they spoke in tongues and praised God.

In these three ways Peter recognised the work of the Holy Spirit.

Before this Peter would have said, well Cornelius you need to undergo conversion to Judaism, be circumcised and adopt all the laws of Moses. But after this, Peter could see that God accepted Cornelius as he was. Now Peter could see that Cornelius didn't need to become a Jew before he could become a Christian. From this point on it is clear that a Christian convert did not need to take on a Jewish identity before becoming Christian. Paul went on to argue that salvation comes through faith and not through the works of the law for both Jew and Greek. But neither Paul nor Peter are saying that Jewish Christians need to give up their identity as Jews, just that Gentiles didn't need to give up their identity as Greeks or Romans to become Christians.

At the time the church was almost exclusively Jewish and no one could imagine a Gentile church. We live in an age where most believers are Gentiles and our churches reflect our cultural back-grounds. We need to learn the lesson in reverse that Jews can become followers of the Messiah without having to reject their Jewish culture.

The Bible has this awesome picture of a significant Gentile church alongside a significant Jewish church. The Scriptures do not support the replacement theology that grew up during the reformation, suggesting that the Church has replaced Israel; the Scriptures give us the model of grafting, that the church has been grafted onto Israel; and Jesus offers salvation to both Jew and Gentile alike on repentance and faith. Romans 11.

Peter said, 'Then Peter began to speak: *"I now realize how true it is that God does not show favouritism but accepts from every nation the one who fears him and does what is right"*'. Act 10:35-36.

That's an amazing statement from someone brought up with a Jewish world view, a view that Jews were at the centre of God's plan and everyone else was on the periphery.

Today we are facing a watershed moment; for too long in America there has been a two-tier justice system and an under valuing of black lives. The appalling history of slavery has cast a long shadow in the U.S. The nation that proclaims in its declaration of independence that *'We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights'* has perpetuated a history of slavery, discrimination and racial prejudice. This is highlighted by the extra-judicial killing of black men by police officers. This is an endemic problem in the USA, and we need to call it out just exactly the same as we need to protest the treatment of Uighur men and women in Xinjiang. We need to be clear that *that God does not show favouritism*, God does not see colour, but he sees all races as of equal value, and that needs to be reflected in the public square.

The 'Black Lives Matter' protests are challenging a structural injustice, and change will come as White people stand with Black people and speak truth to power. Most police officers are good, but the system has a rot in it.

In Aotearoa New Zealand we have a beloved Police force, but also a history of the killing of non-combatant Maori by the armed constabulary, from Parihaka and Te Renga from to Rangiaowhia to Maungapohatu. We still have a long way to go. Maori make up 16% of our population but 51% of the prison population, something is wrong in NZ justice, we know gangs are a large part of that, but why are so many of our rangitahi attracted to the gang culture.

Change comes when the majority culture joins the minority culture in calling for change and when the majority culture listens to the cry of the other and makes room. As a white man my challenge in this generation is to hear the voice of my treaty partner and to make room. Like Peter visited Cornelius.

Four challenges especially for Pakeha, but true for us all:

Challenge 1: I challenge you to learn how to pronounce Maori names correctly. As an old white guy it is hard work, I hear the words in my head and when they come out they sound wrong.

Challenge 2: When you see discrimination call it out.

Challenge 3: This is especially for Pakeha, move aside, make space for a non-white person beside you in a position of leadership, seek out non-white voices.

Challenge 4: Build friendships across culture, go deeper in your acquaintanceship with someone outside your circle. Share your culture.

As a member of the majority culture in NZ, I see that I am privileged and need to explore ways of sharing that privilege, firstly with Maori and then with Pacifica and Asian brothers and sisters. Whatever culture you come from, God values that and I pray that we will see the Spirit lead us into a new era of equality and justice under God.