

Sermon: Acts 11.1-18, Psalm 148, Revelation 21.1-6, John 13.31-35 Saying 'Yes' to God

The texts today remind me of CS Lewis's statements that Christianity is either of immense importance or of no significance at all but it can't be just a bit important; it's either completely true or an outrageous lie but it can't be half true.

And so what are we to make of our New Testament readings today? Was Peter deceiving the Jewish Christians so they would accept Gentiles into the new church or did the Spirit really give both him and the Gentile converts powerful spiritual experiences? Was John hallucinating when he had his dramatic vision of a new heaven and Earth or did the Holy Spirit really inspire this message from God?

And what of Jesus himself? He claims that God and he, the Son of Man, glorify one another and He has the God given authority to command people to do whatever he says. Is his claim of divinity the greatest lie of all time or is he truly the Son of God?

As followers of Jesus, our faith convicts us to ecstatically shout out "yes" to these questions. Yes, the power of the Holy Spirit did fall on Peter and the Gentiles. Yes, John's revelation was inspired by God. And yes, Jesus is our Lord, the Son of God and we do our best to obey His commands. On that sure foundation, it behooves us to reflect upon: What does saying "yes" mean for the way we lead our life? Let us consider what insights we can gather from the texts about answering this important question.

Acts 11.1-18: The Gentiles Converted

Acts 11 begins in verses 1 to 3 with Peter being criticised by the Jewish Christians for having accepted uncircumcised men into the new church. All leaders will at some point be criticised for a decision they make. The more radical the decision the more likely the criticism and Peter's decision here was way out there as far as the followers in Jerusalem was concerned. It fundamentally challenged the Jewish perception of how God works in the world. What follows in this chapter is clear instruction on how both the leader and the followers should deal with such potentially divisive situations.

Verse 4 states: “Then Peter began to explain it to them, step by step...”

How easy it is when someone disagrees with us to get defensive or even to get angry and dismissive of them. Peter didn't. He patiently, humbly and with great care explained why he had made the decision he did. I suspect many of our own experiences of situations like these testify to how difficult making that choice can be. But he made it and so can we.

And what an explanation it was! Verses 5 to 17 provide a shortened account of the conversion of the Gentiles in the house of Cornelius as described throughout Chapter 10. Verse 5 tells us that it was while he was talking to his Father that he saw a dramatic vision of all sorts of wild animals. In verse 7 he is told to kill and eat these animals but he balks at such a thing – it would breach the Jewish laws. In verse 9 Peter is sharply rebuked : “What God has made clean, you must not call profane”, and before he even has a chance to think about it the men sent by Cornelius arrive. The Holy Spirit tells Peter to go with them without hesitation. So he does, despite it being unlawful for him to associate with or even visit a Gentile. He now understands that the vision was the Spirit telling him not to make any distinction between them and the Jews. The outcome is that all the gentiles in Cornelius's house receive the Holy Spirit, speaking in tongues just as the disciples did on the day of Pentecost. In verse 17 Peter finishes his account by asking: “If then God gave them the same gift that he gave us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could hinder God?”

The Christian Jews could have disputed all of this. Often when we're faced with facts that need us to significantly change the way we do things, we actually choose to reject them and keep going on our merry way. But the Jews here found the strength and courage to accept a new reality. Indeed in verse 18 they praise God for allowing the Gentiles to repent and find eternal life.

So what does declaring “yes” to the power of the Holy Spirit mean for us?

(Invite response from the congregation)

Some thoughts on its meaning are:

- Like Peter, prayer must be the foundation of all our actions.
- We too can expect God to answer that prayer and we shouldn't be surprised when the Holy Spirit turns up to show us what to do.
- We too can be given the courage and strength to change the way we live
- We must not put up barriers to any person having the opportunity to hear the saving word of God.

Revelation 21.1-6- The new heaven and earth

Now we turn to John in Revelation 21. 1-6. The new heaven and the new earth of verse 1 was a dream deeply held by the Jewish people. In Isaiah 65 and 66 the prophet speaks of the new creation which God will make where the old heaven and earth will be forgotten and the new will be a continual act of worship and praise to God. The joyous praising of God in Psalm 148 is indeed a foretaste of what is to come. The deeper reference is to “and the sea was no more.” The people of this time saw the sea as dangerous and uncontrollable – it was feared and often used as a symbol of chaos and destruction. In the new heaven and earth, there is nothing to be feared.

Verses 2 to 4 describe the nature of this new heaven and earth. It takes the form of a holy city, the new Jerusalem. Again this was a dream long held by the Jewish people. They longed for the ideal community where they would live in perfect harmony with God; where there is no pain or suffering. In verse 3 the angelic voice makes it clear that this ideal will be for all mortals and that God will dwell with his peoples, not people, but the plural, Jews and Gentiles alike.

In verses 5 and 6 it is then God himself who speaks: “See, I am making all things new.” Not that He *will* make things new but that he is doing it right now. The Lord who made all things is continually remaking the world until it finally becomes the perfect creation He always meant it to be. And he assures us that this will happen when he declares: “It is done! I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. The Greek used here does not refer to a sequence in time, the first and the last in a series. As William Barclay says, these words mean that for all people *“God is the source of being in which they begin and the final goal to which they inevitably go.”* It is this deep thirst within each person to know the source of our creation and to reach our final goal that God graciously quenches with his free gift of the water of life.

Once again I ask what does it mean for us to proclaim “Yes” to the truth of this Revelation?

(Invite response from the congregation)

Some thoughts on its meaning are:

- We can explore with God how He is continually remaking us through our faith in Christ. What part of our life may we need to change?
- We can be sustained by the truth that the ideal world which we long for is not only a reality but that its Creator has promised it will come to pass.

It is of course patently obvious that we do not live in that ideal world yet. Let us see what light our gospel reading may shed on how we are to cope until God's ideal comes to pass.

John 13.31-35

In John 13. 31-35 we have Jesus announcing to his disciples that he will be leaving them very soon and they can't come with him. He knew the trials and tribulations that would follow for them. He knew that they would be living in a world not yet God's ideal and they would suffer much hardship. So in this text how did he seek to support them? In verses 31 and 32 Jesus declares four certainties:

First, that the glory of Jesus has arrived and that glory is his great sacrifice on the Cross

Second, that God is glorified in Jesus. This can be taken to be a reference to our Lord's obedience in suffering on the Cross. By obeying his parent at such great cost Jesus gives his Father glory.

Third, that God glorifies Himself in Jesus. This shows how intimately entwined is the glory of Father and Son. As Barclay explains: "*Had God remained aloof and majestic, serene and unmoved, untouched by any sorrow and unhurt by any pain, men might have feared God, and men might have admired God; but men would never have loved God...It is in the Incarnation and the Cross that God's supreme glory is displayed.*"

Fourth, that God will glorify Jesus without delay.

The import of these declarations is to give to the disciples *the reason* to endure whatever may befall them in the future: namely that Jesus is the Son of God who has fulfilled his mission to save all humanity.

Then in verse 34 and 35, Jesus gives some very important practical advice on *how they can* endure the path ahead: He commands them to love one another, just as he has loved them. I suggest that Jesus knew that without the caring, loving support of each other they would not be able to withstand the persecution that was to follow.

Which brings me to ask the third question: What does saying 'Yes', Jesus is our Lord, the Son of God mean for us?

(Invite response from the congregation)

Some thoughts on its meaning are:

- We can do as Psalm 148 proclaims: Praise Jesus, our Lord
- We can seek the Holy Spirit's guidance to understand and live by Jesus' commandments
- We can strive to love one another in the way Jesus modelled.

To conclude, these texts are rich in insight and challenging to implement. I pray that the Lord will give us each the wisdom, humility and love to live His word in a way that enables Him to remake us each day in His image and to praise Him in all things.

C S Lewis from "Mere Christianity"

I am trying here to prevent anyone saying the really foolish thing that people often say about Him: 'I'm ready to accept Jesus as a great moral teacher, but I don't accept His claim to be God.' That is the one thing we must not say. A man who was merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher. He would either be a lunatic – on a level with the man who says he is a poached egg – or else he would be the Devil of Hell. You must make your choice. Either this man was, and is, the Son of God: or else a madman or something worse. You can shut Him up for a fool, you can spit at Him and kill Him as a demon; or you can fall at His feet and call Him Lord and God. But let us not come with any patronising nonsense about His being a great human teacher. He has not left that open to us. He did not intend to.