

Easter 5 – May 15, 2022

[Acts 11: 1-18; John 13: 31-35]

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O God, our strength and our redeemer. Amen.

If the Acts story sounds familiar, it's because it is – the mention of Joppa again is our clue. We heard it first on Easter Day; then last week's story was set in Joppa, with the raising of Tabitha; Cornelius and Peter's visions immediately follow in the next chapter. Today is a recap of those extraordinary events, in case we missed it the first time. Maybe Luke, who authored Acts as well as his gospel, just ran out of time or inspiration and decided to recycle an old story – not unlike many preachers... (except this one of course:)

Now the apostles and the believers who were in Judea heard that the Gentiles had also accepted the word of God. So when Peter went up to Jerusalem, the circumcised believers criticized him, saying, "Why did you go to uncircumcised men and eat with them?" Then Peter began to explain it to them, step by step, saying, "I was in the city of Joppa praying, and in a trance I saw a vision....

Luke isn't retelling that remarkable story simply because he couldn't think of anything else to write. The blow by blow account is Peter's *defence* of his indefensible actions: keeping company with Italian non-Jews and eating their defiling non-kosher food. Why would he do such a scandalous thing? What could possibly compel him to commit such egregious acts? Given this story is in the book entitled the Acts of the Apostles, it should come as no surprise that the apostles (literally "persons sent forth") would do such surprising, even shocking things – we have only to consider their Sender – the one and the same God who also raised Jesus of Nazareth.

The Giving Our Thanks and Praise programme announced today, is an opportunity for us to consider, individually and as a parish, our own defence if you will – our motivation, our inspiration for doing what we do and giving what we give. We need to be able to do so if we are to impact others. Our personal and corporate acts may or may not be as offensive or controversial as those of the apostle Peter, but that does not exempt us from doing what he says elsewhere in his own letter: *Always be ready to make your defence to anyone who demands from you an account of the hope that is in you.*

But we are Anglican, we protest, and Canadian Anglicans at that – we are not accustomed, generally speaking, to making a show of ourselves or attesting to our religious convictions. Up until the end of Christendom, when western culture was equated with Christian culture, there was no need to make a show of faith since society, to a large extent, did that for us – from reciting the Lord’s Prayer before classes began, habitual church attendance, stores being closed on Sundays and holidays, to school Christmas plays. We can choose to blame Sun. morning hockey for the church’s decline, but it’s really not the issue – we simply don’t know how to give our defence because we haven’t had to do so.

The era we call Christendom, writes the author of *The Change of Conversion and the Origin of Christendom*, “could be said to have begun when the Roman emperor, Constantine, converted to Christianity in 312 A.D. Christianity was legalized the following year when Constantine issued the Edict of Milan, giving Christianity “a position of privileged equality with other religions.” A Presbyterian pastor comments that, “This changed everything for Christianity. Up until this time, the church had been in a position of weakness in the Roman Empire. The period of Christendom began the moment Constantine announced his edict and thrust the church into a position of power.

This seems more than a little counter-intuitive to me, given that the One whom God raised, died because he proclaimed weakness as strength, and refused to use his power for anything but God’s glory. The 4th gospel takes us back to the night before Jesus died, where he washed the disciples’ feet and reversed the power balance.

I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.”

Our defence, if not above love, is nothing. God’s radically inclusive grace, as illustrated by the oneness of Jew and Gentile, master and servant, friend and stranger, requires our willingness to participate in such acts with generous self-giving. We don’t muster it up for ourselves, thankfully; we do so with God’s help, as we promise in the baptismal covenant:

Will you seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving your neighbour as yourself?

We will, with God’s help.

Amen.