

Easter 5 / May 15, 2022

Acts 11:18

“And they glorified God saying, ‘Then to the Gentiles also God has granted repentance that leads to life.’”
God grants all people repentance that leads to life

Our text this morning concludes a section in Acts which began with Peter being sent to preach the gospel to a Roman Centurion named Cornelius. The result was that the Holy Spirit fell upon Cornelius and his household and they were all baptized. Peter and his companions were amazed, not by the outpouring of the Holy Spirit; they were familiar with that. They were amazed, because these people were not Jews, and yet they received the same gift the Jews had received when they heard the gospel. The night He was betrayed Jesus spoke of the Holy Spirit and His work saying, *“When the Spirit of Truth comes, He will guide you into all the truth.”* This was a teaching moment for the Holy Spirit and a learning moment for the Jewish believers. Peter and his companions realized the truth that God grants repentance that leads to life to all people, through faith in Christ Jesus.

Has anyone ever asked you, what you are? Meaning of course, your ethnic background. The Jews of first century Palestine had a strong sense of ethnicity. They knew who they were and what made them different from everyone else. They were familiar with the books of Ezra and Nehemiah, in which their ancestors were enjoined to practice strict segregation from all non-Jewish peoples. They knew the reason why. To prevent them from falling in the sin of idolatry! Idolatry had been the ruin of their ancestors. It had caused both the destruction of Jerusalem and the exile to Babylon. They were Hebrews, descendants of the 12 tribes. They were Jews, descendants from the tribe of Judah. Everyone else, no matter what their ethnicity, were Gentiles. Having focused on Ezra and Nehemiah, they had lost sight of the larger vision of universal blessing promised to the Gentiles, through the seed of Abraham. Sometimes we miss the big picture when we fix our gaze on a part rather than the whole.

They missed the big picture. They underestimated the scope of God’s vision for the world. They had forgotten that God’s purpose in choosing the Hebrew people and calling them Israel, was so that they would be a light to the Gentiles by making His name and salvation known throughout the earth. In our text, Peter and his companions were called to account by the leadership of the Jerusalem Church, for violating the custom of the Jews by visiting the home of a Gentile. When Peter related what had happened and told how the Holy Spirit fell upon the Gentiles as He had upon the Jews, their minds were opened and their vision of Israel and the Church’s mission was broadened. Luke says, *“They glorified God, saying, ‘Then to the Gentiles also God has granted repentance that leads to life.’”* Without the benefit of a genealogy search engine or a DNA test kit, I would say that all of us are probably of the Gentile race. We glorify God for the salvation we have received in Christ. We give thanks that God has granted us repentance that leads to life. We remember that God created the Church and called us into its fellowship, so we too would share the gospel of repentance through faith in Christ with all people, regardless of their ethnicity, both Jew and Gentile.

We can never overestimate the importance of the Holy Spirit to the life of the Church and to our lives as believers. In the Nicene Creed we confess the Holy Spirit as “the Lord and Giver of Life.” The Spirit gives and sustains the life of the natural world. In Psalm 104 the psalmist sang, *“When you send forth your Spirit they are created, and you renew the face of the ground.”* The Spirit gives us life in Christ. He calls us to rise to life from the sleep of spiritual death, by opening our hearts to faith in Christ. The Holy Spirit empowers us to walk in the new life we receive through faith in Christ. The Holy Spirit calls, gathers and enlightens the whole Christian Church on earth with the gospel of salvation, received through repentance and faith in Jesus Christ. The Holy Spirit unites believers in Christ. He makes His dwelling within each believer, so that we are all temples of the Holy Spirit.

The Holy Spirit works within each one of us to know the mind of Christ, so that we may live in harmony with His will. The night of His betrayal, Jesus spoke of the Holy Spirit and His work for the church. He said, *“But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, He will teach you all things and bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you.”* The Holy Spirit enlightens our faith by deepening our understanding. He does this, not by giving us new revelations of things previously unspoken. He teaches us through the scriptures. He shows how Jesus fulfills the scriptures; in particular those pertaining to the good news of salvation offered for all people through faith in His name. In our text, the Holy Spirit enlightened the mind of the Jerusalem Church to understand what God had already revealed in the ancient scriptures. That He grants repentance to life to all people through faith in Christ Jesus.

In granting repentance that leads to life through faith in Christ, God also showed that the nature of His relationship with Israel had changed. It had changed, not in the sense that God had rejected the Jewish people. He has not. It changed in the sense that God's relationship with Israel, those who held Him in their hearts as their God and Saviour, had broadened to include all nations, as well as the Jewish nation. Israel never was just the Jewish people. Israel was the Jewish people who held the Lord in their hearts as God and honoured His covenant. Israel was never restricted to the 12 Hebrew tribes. Many Gentile people held the Lord in their heart as their God and Saviour and in this were members of Israel. Ruth the Moabite, the great-grandmother of King David, is just one such person. Israel was the people who lived with God under the covenant He made through Moses at Mount Sinai. But something had changed.

Jesus had made a new covenant on Mount Calvary through the blood He shed on the cross. Jesus extended this covenant to include all nations. His blood had atoned for the sin of the world. Israel would no longer be primarily restricted to one ethnic group. Israel, the people of God, was now expanded to include people from every nation, tribe and language. The intention of the covenant God made at Mount Sinai was to separate Israel from the nations to keep them from idolatry, so that they would be a light to the Gentiles and make God known in the world. Jesus makes God known in forgiveness and life. He is the perfect offspring of Israel. He is the light of the world. He radiates the light of salvation to all nations. In Jesus, God offers forgiveness to all people, both Jew and Gentile. In Jesus, God grants repentance and life to all who believe.

God's intention in the Covenant of Mount Sinai was to create a people separate from the nations of the world. He taught Israel His laws, so people would know He is holy and just. He showed Israel the nature of His being, so we would know that He is loving, kind, gracious and forgiving. He sent His Son into the world through the Jewish people. Jesus is the fullest expression of divine, justice, love and forgiveness. He is our Saviour and Redeemer. God's intention in the covenant He made new on Mount Calvary, is to call all nations to Himself through faith in Christ Jesus. In the letter to the Galatians St. Paul wrote, "*For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek...for you are all one in Christ Jesus...Abraham's offspring, heirs according to the promise.*" Jews are no longer to keep separate from Gentiles. Instead, Jew and Gentile are made one in the New Israel, through faith in Jesus and the washing of regeneration by the Holy Spirit in baptism.

Peter and his companions rejoiced when they realized that God had granted the Gentiles repentance that leads to life. When the leaders of the Jerusalem Church realized this, they rejoiced. We rejoice too, because to us God has granted repentance that leads to life through faith in Jesus. In the letter to the Ephesians, St. Paul wrote to us Gentiles saying, once you "*were alienated from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world, but now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ.*" We rejoice in God our Saviour. We give thanks for the hope we have in Christ.

Everything changed with Jesus, because Jesus changed everything! He changed our relation with God. He changed our relationships with each other. He even changed the dinner menu! Food that was forbidden to Israel in the former covenant has been declared clean by God in the new covenant. We are made clean by Jesus in forgiveness received through faith in Him. We rejoice that God has granted all people repentance that leads to life through faith in Jesus' Name. We thank God for the gift of faith. We pray more people would come to faith. We glorify God and praise His Name. In Jesus' Name. Amen