

# THE ACTS OF THE APOSTLES

## WEEK SEVEN

### A NEW WORLD



*Peter receives a vision*

#### **Read with your heart**

Peter's response to the vision is gut-level revulsion. He then thinks, then acts differently. Heart, then head, then feet.

Our lives now are stories of what God is doing. As we listen with our imaginations to Peter's experience, is anything triggered in my feelings? Are there memories that surface of my life being rocked, of

experiencing a change of heart, seeing a person, situation, my own story in a new way? Have I known the Holy Spirit leading me into a new truth and felt changed by this?

## **Read with your head**

These two passages from chapters 10 and 11 outline two of the most controversial and difficult contemporary issues that faced fledgling Christian communities in terms of shaping the new world they believed in. The two issues are eating laws and circumcision. Both are strong links to the Jewish practices that Jesus and the disciples grew up with. The question addressed in these passages is: how far does this new community continue to observe these historic and important practices and how far does it form new rituals, new practices, new doctrines? These chapters are decisive. Luke has shown how the promises to the people of Israel have been fulfilled in chapters 1-7. Then in chapter 8, he shows his readers how the message reached even the detested Samaritans (through Philip), and the sexually mutilated Ethiopian eunuch (Philip baptised the man by the side of the road). We heard Paul's story next, and now the most confrontational and dangerous step is to come; to define this new movement as radically inclusive. Not ethnically defined but universal. Now begins the greatest struggle for identity and for a new future in a new world. The next 5 chapters are devoted to the issues that are brought up by Peter's vision of inclusiveness.

Chapter 10 v 9. Peter's story is interwoven with that of a centurion called Cornelius, although we are looking at Peter's vision here. Just before this passage, Cornelius has had a vision to send men to Joppa (by the sea) and ask Peter, previously called Simon, to see him. Cornelius's conversion (as a Roman centurion) and Peter's vision redefining what is clean and unclean, are key and decisive moments in shaping the new world.

v11 *something like a great sheet* in fact the Greek is *skeuos* which means an instrument or vessel which is like a sheet let down by four corners.

v12 *all the four footed creatures* is intended to address the Leviticus law 11.1-47 which makes distinctions between clean and unclean, which may be eaten or may not be eaten.

v14 The Greek is very strong here; the negative *by no means* is only found here in the New Testament. It is a vehement perhaps emotional denial (something we might expect from Peter!).

v15 *things God has cleansed*. The Greek verb used is the same as that used for priests who pronounce on matters of ritual impurity in Leviticus. It's also used in the healing of lepers in Luke's gospel. The implication is that all that God has created is declared clean by God and humans don't have the right to declare otherwise.

v16 *this happened three times* readers will be reminded of Peter's denial three times, and his restoration by Christ three times. The divine initiative simply overwhelms Peter's (human) resistance, reluctance, refusal in the end?

Chapter 11 Peter now has to explain his vision to the community. Remember his vehement denial during the vision. Now he has to persuade the rest of the community of something he was himself extremely reluctant to accept. He also has to recount the conversion of the Gentiles that Cornelius had sent to Joppa. This stretches their imaginations beyond anything they could have predicted before.

v3 Peter is accused of eating with Gentiles, bringing these two issues together. This is to collude in idolatry (eg Daniel 1.8).

v4 Luke has Peter being very methodical, step by step explaining everything in sequence, emphasising the pivotal importance of this conversation.

v 12 *diakrinomenos* making no distinction. This is fundamental and radical. Then Peter cleverly implicates *these six brothers* who are themselves circumcised, critics of his. He makes sure the Jerusalem Council understand that these men not only witness to what Peter is saying, but are implicated, by approving of the baptism he then does.

v 14 Luke/Peter makes it clear that everything is at stake here; this is not just about eating or circumcision, it is about being saved.

v 17 Peter's key argument. It is the same gift – *isen dorean* – he emphasises it is the same for Gentile and Jew. Therefore there is no discrimination in church practice. Who was I that I could hinder God?

Huge themes are touched on here, very human themes of gut instinct revulsion, fear of change, accusations of treachery, bravery of an individual, open mindedness to have all your previous assumptions challenged. Controversy is beginning to surface for the new communities. It is the very newness of things that makes their path so dangerous from now on.

### **Read with your feet**

We gather on a Sunday, and are dispersed during the week. What does it mean to be the “dispersed church”? Do you feel part of it in your ordinary working day/week/at home? The radically inclusive vision we've read about today is deeply challenging to Peter. Where do I need courage to see where I exclude a person or group in small everyday ways? Do I want to be challenged as deeply as Peter was? Do I want to pray that my heart might be changed, in the way of Acts, by the Holy Spirit? Notice how this might begin to happen? And what new world do I long for? Or resist?