

The Sheet incident – Peter’s vision Acts 11:1-18

One day I was in Geneva - I was on a backpacking trip around Europe. It was very late at night and I was walking with a friend to his apartment. As we were walking along a young boy came up to me on his bike and said: Sheets mister, sheets mister?

I didn't know what he meant – I thought for a moment he was selling sheets but it was a bit late.

Anyway my friend told him where to go in no uncertain terms and the boy rode off into the darkness. I asked him what was that all about. He said that the boy works for the brothels. When he says, “sheet’s mister” he’s asking if you want a lot more than just sheets – he gets paid a few francs for every customer he gets for the brothel.

A ‘sheet’ experience’ and he was offering “unclean” goods.

In this reading we have a ‘sheet experience’ where Peter is also offered what, in his mind, is totally unclean.

You see Peter was a good Jew and Jews have the idea of clean and unclean totally, totally, ingrained.

It’s nothing like what we call clean and unclean.
It’s nothing to do with dirtiness or hygiene.

God declared certain things and certain activities either clean or unclean. He asked his people to stay away from unclean things in order to stay clean. Most of the unclean things had something to do with death – death has nothing to do with God so most things to do with death are unclean.

For example animals which scavenge and eat dead things, like crows, dogs, pigs, sharks, and, I’m sorry, crayfish are declared unclean. And animals which have a split hoof and chew their cuds, like sheep and cattle are declared clean.

In Leviticus it’s quite specific about clean and unclean. It even lists some border line animals. For example a Camel chews it’s cud but it doesn’t have a split hoof so it’s unclean. A Pig does have a split hoof but it doesn’t chew its cud so it’s also unclean.

Blood is a big no, no. Shed blood is obviously shed life – in other words blood equals death and so very unclean.

And the clean and unclean thing cuts across all society – even jobs. For instance a Jew could never be a leather tanner as you would have to touch dead animal skin and therefore become permanently unclean.

Clean unclean was even racial. Any race that was not Jewish was obviously unclean. A good Jew would not even walk in the shadow of a Gentile – which is a non Jew.

Of course there's sin and accidents where people deliberately or accidentally touch things that are unclean so they remain cut off from God – only totally clean things come into God's presence.

So out of grace God introduces the sacrificial system in which people who have become unclean – most often by sin - can sacrifice pure, clean animals, to wash away all uncleanness.

(you know how it all works)

The blood of an innocent lamb for instance removes all the guilt of sin. No wonder John the Baptist saw Jesus his cousin for the first time and said: "behold the lamb of God"

Today Peter who has been a faithful Jew all his life is confronted with a sheet full of unclean animals and God says: Kill and eat. Kill that porker and eat. Kill that venison and eat. Boil that crayfish and eat.

Of course Peter says, "surely not, I can't do that Lord".

The Lord replies, "surely yes! Do not call any thing unclean which I have made clean. Now Kill and eat.

God is saying that everything that was once a barrier between himself and us is removed – things are new after Easter.

He's saying that Jesus blood was a sacrifice once and for all. Absolute, cleanliness, or better still, absolute forgiveness and access to the very presence of God has been achieved once and for all by Jesus sacrifice.

It was a "sheet" experience for Peter to show him that there are no more unclean things. The Sheet experience was a turning point in God's plan of salvation.

Now funny enough: "While Peter was still thinking" about all this 3 men from Caesarea came to invite him to speak at the home of Cornelius.

I'm not sure if you realize how significant this is – this is the turning point in mission history.

After the sheet experience he was invited to go to the home of Cornelius – which simply means Roman – with three other Romans.

Unheard of – unreal – unbelievable!!

Imagine what it was like for Peter the Jewish Christian to go into an 'unclean' Roman home?

As he enters the home of Cornelius he says; *"You know that we Jews are not allowed to have anything to do with Romans.*

He's clearly worried, he enters, and says; *But God has shown me that he doesn't think anyone is unclean or unfit. I am certain that God treats all people alike. God accepts everyone from every nation...*

Then Peter the ex-Jewish person tells the Romans about Jesus.

- How he was a witness to the crucifixion and how God raised Jesus on the third day.
- How everything Jesus said and did was in accordance with what the prophets had announced all through history.
- How everyone who believes in Jesus has forgiveness of all their sins.

With Peter's message, which was not a carefully crafted sermon, just an account of the facts, the Holy Spirit was able to move the Romans from unbelief to belief – from being unsaved to being saved. **They asked to be baptised. Never been done before. Unheard of – un Kosha – but it happened.**

Peter goes home with a new conviction that all Christians are missionaries to all Gentiles (nations)

What do you think happened when he got home? News had got around.

He walked into Jerusalem into silence. What's the matter??

And then it came with thunder from his fellow Jews: *You went into the house of a Gentile and ate with them. You're gone! You're unclean! You're unfaithful!*

So Peter explained the whole thing again – the sheet – what God said to do with the unclean animals, and the meeting with the Romans - his witness to Jesus death and resurrection – and most of all he told them how the Holy Spirit worked in their hearts.

What!! they said, "the Holy Spirit worked in them as well?"

Yes the same gift that enabled us to believe was given to them. "Who am I to oppose God?"

And that did it. When they heard this they had no further objections and praised God saying: *God has granted even the gentiles repentance unto life.*

The gap was crossed.

Now Jesus command to love your neighbour really meant what it meant – that person next to you – that person in any context, in marriage, in sport, in business.

The sheet was the practical message reminding them of the obvious = Jesus died for all people – all people have salvation.

We had synod yesterday and a very good guest Speaker. Who really challenged us about the church? She had a Psalm: *God is at home among mortals* (not immortals) Mortals are dying people. So where is the church – among dying people.

She also said we are gardeners of our patch – wherever we are in life. She quoted Jeremiah 29 where God tells his people who are in exile (punishment) to settle down and plant trees and have children – this is home for now – this place of exile is yours – care for it – garden it. We all know what happens when we stop gardening a lovely garden – it dies.

The big question was where we do most of our gardening. Invariably we all said we do most of our gardening in the church. We spend most of our time and money by far watering the church and hoping people come to church. Most of our worry and prayers are about how to bring people to church.

Our churches become gardening conferences – but we never garden at the place God gives us – our street, our suburb, in our family.

We put all our energy keeping alive people (that's us) alive. We are alive in Christ – born again.

Why don't we garden among people who are dying? God is at home among the dying.

Don't garden here – Garden in your street.

Don't do music here – take music to those who don't have God's song in your suburb.

Don't talk theology here with theologians (this is what you are) – take theology to those in your circle of influence who have no theology.

Don't grow flowers for here – grow flowers for your people who have no flowers.

We have a Sunday school complex and rooms and rooms of recourse but no kids – take Sunday school where the kids are.

God taught Peter a lifesaving message with some pork – God is at home with the gentiles who are dying – this is where the church is.

It's back to front isn't it?

God says: Peter take me to those who are dying – not those who are alive.

This place (the church as we know it) is the place for the living – a place to get your secateurs sharpened – this is the place to oil your hedge trimmers – this is the place to get some rest before you go off gardening again.

Father, let us take you to where people are dying. Let's us offer living water to all people. Amen.