

Family Worship – Sunday 21st June 2020

(If you have access to Facebook, you'll find a video that includes most of the material provided for this week on our Facebook page: www.facebook.com/muckamorepc If you don't have access, here's some of the contents for you to read)

Hello everyone and thanks for joining us for another week of Family Worship in our homes. One of the things I've been hoping over the past few months is that you've been sitting down together and not just watching the video talks or reading the script but singing along with the songs and praying together for yourselves instead of having someone like me doing it all for you! So, we'll continue to use that pattern again, today, and over the summer months.

Let's start with a very familiar song but maybe not quite as we're used to singing or hearing it. It's "Amazing Grace" and you may have seen this version already which has been recorded by people from 50 different countries affected by Covid-19. One of the things that struck me as I watched it is the way some of our brothers and sisters in Christ have to have their faces blurred to protect them from persecution – pray for them. Singing in their own languages, it gives us a flavour of what it must've been like in the early days of the church when groups of people spoke in different languages as the Holy Spirit gave witness to God's power at work within them – people like Cornelius and his family as we'll see in our study today. You'll find the song here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BA7pdABvpnc>
If you don't have access to Facebook, please play a suitable track from one of your CDs.

Please pray together, giving thanks to God for the amazing grace he shows us in the Lord Jesus; for the forgiveness we have through him; and for the gift of the Holy Spirit who moulds and shapes us as we follow Jesus in our daily lives; and for the hope of eternal life as we wait for Jesus to return again.

The Bible passage we'll be looking at together is Acts 10:23b-48. Please read it for yourselves - if there's more than one of you, perhaps you could take it in turn to read...

If you don't have access to Facebook, here's Peter sermon for you to read:

Acts 10:23b-48 "A Divine Appointment"

A few weeks ago, I mentioned the outreach work some of our young folks did a number of years ago with Worship Ireland – heading to different locations around Ireland to sing and speak and distribute CDs that included the young folks singing and an evangelistic message by their mentor and encourager, George Barkley, from Randalstown. Wherever they went, the young folks had conversations with a variety of people as they handed out the CDs, many of whom were so glad to be able to talk to someone about Jesus. George called these conversations 'divine appointments' because, he said, they hadn't been arranged by the young folks but by God. And that pretty much describes the scene in Acts 10 for us - a divine appointment between Peter and Cornelius.

Cornelius is an interesting character. On the one hand, from his youngest days as a Roman citizen, he'd have been brought up to regard the Emperor as a god to be worshipped - a practice that began at the start of the Empire under Augustus and carried on for over 300 years before it was gradually abandoned when Constantine the Great started supporting Christianity. As a high ranking Roman officer in the Italian Regiment, Cornelius' total allegiance to Caesar was demanded – and yet, Acts 10:2 tells us "He and all his family were devout and God-fearing; he gave generously to those in need and prayed to God regularly". You'd think he'd have been careful to keep this side of his personal life hidden from his fellow soldiers and superiors, for fear of being accused of disloyalty to Caesar, wouldn't

you? Yet, the men who came to find Peter in Joppa were able to say to him: “ask any Jew in this part of the country and they’ll tell you he’s a God-fearing man well-known for his fair play”. His personal belief that the God of Israel is the true God – not Caesar or anyone or anything else – was well-known and something that influenced the way he lived both as an individual and how he carried out his role as a Centurion.

A few years ago, I got a phone call from a lady who asked if I’d be happy to meet with her and a colleague to chat about a member of the congregation they were wanting to nominate for a special award. I agreed to do so and met them over a coffee one morning. They explained about what they were wanting to do and why they felt it was something that deserved to be done and asked me to talk a little about the person’s involvement in church. As always the case when I’m asked for a reference, I described the person as honestly as I could, talking about their genuine Christian beliefs and commitment, their concern for others and their active involvement in the life and witness of the congregation and wider church. At one point, the lady turned to her colleague and said, “that’s exactly how he is in the workplace” – and I have to tell you, I was so proud and pleased to hear her say that! She was basically saying to her colleague what the men had said to Peter about Cornelius: “ask anyone who works in our place and they’ll tell you he’s a Christian man well-known for his fair play”. It’s always great when you hear people talk like that about a Christian. Cornelius was getting there. He’d started well – now he just had to take the final step – but that’s where he needed Peter’s help. You see, when the Bible describes someone as a God-fearer it’s telling us two things: one, that they’re a Gentile, and two, that they’ve come to believe that the God of the OT is the only, true God. However, despite that belief, they were denied full acceptance into the religious system practised in the Temple where a partition, a marble balustrade, kept Gentiles from going any further, with notices telling them that no responsibility could be taken for the probable death of any Gentile who ventured beyond. In other words, they were kept at arm’s length, if you like; outsiders, people who were “far off/away” as Peter talks about in Acts 2:39 - “The promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off/away – for all whom the Lord our call will call”. It might come as a bit of a surprise to you but preachers don’t always realise the full implications of something they say in the course of a sermon – we can be thinking on one level but the Holy Spirit can take what we say to another level, as it were, giving it a much greater significance than we appreciate at the time. I think Acts 2:39 is an example of that. Think about it for a moment. This was the day of Pentecost when the Holy Spirit came upon people in a way never before experienced. And it’s Peter who’s preaching – the Peter who had yet to be challenged by God through the dream he had on the roof of Simon’s house in Joppa about what was ‘kosher’ and what was not. On the Day of Pentecost he was talking to “Jews from all over the world”, Acts 2:5 tells us – including Jews and converts to Judaism from Rome, says v.11 – God-fearers. So, on one level, when he talks about the promise being to people who are ‘far off/away’ he’s thinking about people who are physically remote; but, on another level, could it be that the Holy Spirit is talking in terms of people who are religiously remote – that is, Gentiles? Paul declares in Eph 2:13: “But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far away (same word as Peter used) have been brought near through the blood of Christ” – who’s he talking about? Gentiles. And the result? “Christ himself has made peace between us Jews and you Gentiles by making us all one people. He has broken down the wall of hostility that used to separate us” Eph 2:14. Jesus is the one who made all of this the new reality – “He came to bring the good news of peace to you who were far off (same word as Peter used) and peace to those who were near. Through Jesus”, he continues in Eph 2, “we both have access to the Father by one Spirit”. But back in Acts 10, Peter finds himself at the very beginning of this new era and still had much to learn

about the full extent of its meaning and implications for God's people – people like Cornelius.

It's fascinating to see how God-fearers responded to the fact that they weren't allowed into the inner circle of Jewish Temple worship - they adopted some of the religious practices followed by the Jews, believing that this would make them acceptable to God in the same way as they believed those religious practices did for Jewish believers – God was about to nail that idea once and for all. For Cornelius, one of things he seems to have adopted was the daily prayer routine followed by Jews at that time - twice each day – morning and afternoon – 9am – the third hour – sunrise being 6am – and then the ninth hour – 3pm. Acts 10:3 tells us it was at the time of afternoon prayers that God revealed himself to Cornelius. “Your prayers and neighbourly acts have brought you to God's attention” – please note: they brought him to God's attention – they didn't make him right with God and they can't make us right with God either – religious rites and rituals never can - there was something else needed for that – as Peter was to explain during the divine appointment they were about to share.

On his arrival, Peter discovered quite a large number of people were there and, immediately, he felt he needed to issue a disclaimer in case word would get back to his fellow believers in Jerusalem about him being in a Gentile house. “This is highly irregular, folks” he said. “Jews just don't do this – associate and visit with people who aren't Jews. But God has shown me otherwise and the minute I was sent for, I came, no questions asked. So, tell me, why have you asked me to come?” Cornelius then repeated the story the three men who visited Peter in Joppa had told him. “It's really good of you to have come” he added. “We're all here in God's presence, ready to listen to whatever he has put in your heart to tell us” – wow! A preacher's dream! You couldn't ask for better than that! Peter began by summarising things that Cornelius and his family and close friends already knew about what God was doing through Jesus of Nazareth – how did he know these things? He'd probably picked it up from the three men Cornelius had sent to fetch him as they walked along the road to Caesarea. But Peter fills in the gaps about Jesus for them - he not only brought God's message he IS the message; he not only brings the good news that peace with God is available but he is the personification of that good news – “there is peace with God through Jesus Christ, who is Lord of all” declares Peter. Lord of everyone who believes in him; who not only believe he exists but that he is the means of finding peace with God. “You know the story of what happened in Judea after John had declared the need for a total life-change”, Peter continued. Jesus arrived on the scene - anointed by God for his work as Messiah with the power of the Holy Spirit – transforming the lives of people who were being tyrannised, tormented & oppressed by the devil – evidence of the fact that God was with him. “We saw it all” he tells them, “witnessed everything he did in Judea & Jerusalem. They crucified him, but God brought him back to life on the third day”. He didn't return to the public stage – God had planned it that way beforehand. “We were the ones who saw him, had meals with him; and he commissioned us to testify publicly that he is Lord of all, Judge of all and Saviour of all” – all – no one is excluded; and no one can escape. And all who believe in him will have their sins forgiven through the power of his name. He is the means to forgiveness of sins for people of every age and generation and nationality. The words were hardly out of his mouth than the Holy Spirit took hold of the folks listening to him just as he'd done with the disciples on the day of Pentecost in Jerusalem – Cornelius, his family and close friends speaking in other languages and praising God. This was God at work; this was his power being displayed; this was his way of authenticating something that had never happened before – Gentile believers being accepted publicly by God in the way Jewish believers had. This was a whole new reality. Yes, Gentiles might still have been excluded from the religious life and worship of the Temple in Jerusalem, but not from the family of God that has become known as ‘the church’ – why? Because being made right

with God isn't about religion but relationship. "God accepts people from every nation who fear him and do what is right", says Peter. That doesn't mean what a whole lot of people think it means these days - that anybody of any nation or religion who is devout and does what is right is accepted by God. From the story of Cornelius and other passages in Acts that refer to it, we can see that this devout, God-fearing upright, sincere and generous man still needed to repent and believe in Jesus as Saviour and Lord. Only then did God forgive him, give him the gift of the Spirit and eternal life. That's the way of salvation for anyone and everyone, irrespective of nationality or anything else that we use to differentiate us from each other. That's the way we need to follow every bit as much as Cornelius, his family and close friends – repent and believe – turn away from our own sinful way of life and give Jesus his rightful place as Saviour and Lord. Only then will we be forgiven, receive the Holy Spirit and enjoy eternal life - life that begins now and that goes on forever – beyond the grave and this present, sinful, broken world into the new world that God will establish when Jesus returns. Thank God for that divine appointment in Caesarea long ago – it opened the door for people like you and me to be welcomed into God's family; people who were far away to be brought near – in Jesus. Amazing!

Now watch/listen/sing along with this song – it's a fairly new song written by Matt Papa and Stuart Townend called "Forever Jesus" – the second verse says: *"My song of joy shall be forever Jesus", who bore the suffering, who made a way; His life a gift, His death a precious ransom that wipes the sinner's guilt away and turns our night to glorious day"*. And the chorus says: *"So for all my days I will sing my praise to the King, forever Jesus"*.

You can find the song here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yD0hhy3cQQ4>

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Please pray for others as you finish:

1. people in our fellowship (or families) who have had surgery this past week, especially those who've been waiting a while for this to take place (eg. kidney transplant, cancer surgery etc.)
2. families around the world who've been affected by the Covid-19 virus through illness and/or bereavement – give thanks for those who are recovering from the virus, especially those who were seriously ill in intensive care;
3. people in other countries who live in fear of attack and suffer discrimination and persecution for being Christians;
4. politicians and health officials as they guide us out of lockdown;
5. ministers and elders in PCI as they work through everything that needs to be done in order for our church buildings to be reopened for worship in keeping with the government's guidelines.

Thanks for following this outline for Family Worship – may you know God's presence and sustaining grace with you in the week ahead.