

Some of you may be surprised at the reading that I've chosen for this Easter Sunday – it's **not** the typical Easter Sunday reading.... It's actually about the Kingdom of God, being opened up, not just for the Jews, but also for the Gentiles – for **all** who believe in the Lord Jesus Christ.. And it's also **one** of my favourite readings – just the way we can see the activity of God, all unfolding and meshing together, in different people's lives – I love it...

So, Cornelius is a Gentile (that means he's a non-Jew). He is a centurion in the Italian Regiment of the Roman Army. But even though he's not a Jew, he's learned to love the God **of** the Jews – he's what was known as a “God fearer”. That means, he believed in God – he feared God, and he tried to do the right thing, but he hadn't taken the steps of being converted **to** a Jew...

And we're told that Cornelius was a **devout** man. He prayed continually, and he was generous. And God honours that. In fact, when the angel spoke to him, he said “**Your prayers and your alms**” (that is mercy gifts to those who are in need) “**Your prayers and your alms, have ascended as a memorial before God**”... God honours this....

You know, it's become quite fashionable in evangelical circles today, to say that there is **no value at all** in good works... Well, that's simply not true. However, it's often preached, in order to correct an even worse error. We seem to be a people of extremes, and so we seem to have to push one extreme, to counter another.

Most people in Australian society today believe, “If I’m a good person, I don’t need saving, and I can still get to heaven.”... “As long as I do enough good stuff, and don’t do too much bad stuff, the scales will balance in my favour, and I’ll be good with God.” And that’s just not true. The Bible says, **“No one is righteous.”** All of us are sinners, and we **all** need the forgiveness of God – the forgiveness we can only find, when we receive Jesus Christ as our saviour.....

But the problem is, to correct the notion that “good works will save us”, good works seem to be devalued totally. ... Now, here is an **undeniable** truth, that I want you to remember: God **loves** it, when people do good. And he **hates** it, when people do evil. Our good works will not save us – but in Jesus Christ, we are saved, to **do** good.

The Angel said to Cornelius, **“Your prayers and your alms, have ascended as a memorial before God”**... He had a good heart. He was a devout man. And God knew that his heart was **ripe** for receiving the Lord Jesus Christ.... OK, so Cornelius loved God, he’d **apparently heard** about Jesus, but he didn’t **know** Jesus, and he hadn’t put his faith in Jesus....

Our second character is Peter. And being one of the Apostles, well he knew all **about** Jesus. But his Jewish upbringing meant that he would **never** come in contact with a bloke like Cornelius. His religious upbringing had taught him to be a bit bigoted **against** the Gentiles – after all, they’re not God’s chosen people are they?...

Anyway, an angel comes to Cornelius, and says “Go and find Peter at such-and-such address, in a town called “Joppa”...(Joppa, by the way, is about 48km travel from Caesarea, where Cornelius lived). And so Cornelius sends a couple of servants and a godly soldier to ask Peter to come.

Now, as these messengers are approaching the house of Simon the Tanner, Peter has his own dream (more so, a vision). He’s hungry, and so, (just like Homer Simpson) he dreams of food. Only he dreams of all the sorts of food that he’s been taught as a child, are not kosher – they’re unclean foods that a Jew shouldn’t eat... And he hears a voice **“Rise, Peter; kill and eat.”** And Peter says “No way! I’ve never eating anything that’s common or unclean”... And the same dream was repeated 3 times.

Anyway, he wakes up, and his mind is boggled, as to what all this means. And just as the messengers from Cornelius are about to knock on the door, the Holy Spirit said to Peter, “There’s 3 men down stairs, you’ve got to go with them.” And so he did.

The next day they travel to Caesarea. When they arrive, Cornelius has a whole crowd all gathered together, to hear what Peter has to say...

Now, I’ve gotta tell ya, there are times in life, when so many “God-things” happen, and you know it’s definitely not a coincidence, and it leaves you in absolutely no doubt that God is doing something marvellous. And I’ve found, the more coincidences (or what I call “God-incidences”), the more sure that you can be, that God is challenging you, to a very new and different direction... And whenever you

encounter that, and you are **sure** that God is at work,,,,, Do **not** delay. Do not find excuses. Go with God...

Look at Peter: He would never have set foot in a gentile home – that was against everything that he'd been taught in his religious upbringing.... But there was no doubt, that this was God at work, teaching him a new thing: ²⁸ ... he said to them, "You yourselves know how unlawful it is for a Jew to associate with or to visit anyone of another nation, but God has shown me that I should not call any person common or unclean. ²⁹ So when I was sent for, I came without objection."

And likewise, Cornelius could now have every confidence that this new teaching that **he** was going to receive, about this Jesus of Nazareth, could be received and believed... They had **both** come to a very great big turning point in their walk with God – a big challenge in their faith, but it was obvious that it was all God-ordained, and therefore they could go with it...

It is a marvellous story of encounters with God... And they're the sort of encounters that you can expect today... Now, I want you to notice, they were both men of prayer and men of devotion. And when we pray and devote ourselves to God, we can expect to see similar examples of God at work.

But why on Earth, have I chosen this reading for Easter Sunday????

I'll tell you why: It's because the message that Peter then preached that day, is **typical** of the message that he and the other apostles preached, right throughout this book of Acts... **And the key message that he preached, was the resurrection of The Lord Jesus Christ...** Oh yes, he preached the death of Jesus too... but there's nothing surprising about somebody dying – there's nothing life-changing about somebody dying... It was well known that Jesus had been crucified – lots of people die – after all, there's nothing surer than death... but who has ever heard of somebody being raised **from** the dead?

And when **we're** called to faith, we're not simply called to faith that our sins have been forgiven because somebody died for us – we're called to believe in someone who is living... We're **not** just called to remember a **dead** man – We're called to believe in, and know, this Jesus Christ who is raised from the dead, and to **believe** that He is coming again, to **judge** the living and the dead...

We're called to believe that this Jesus (who is coming again) – this **living** Jesus – that it is by **Him**, that our sins are forgiven, and we gain life...

So, what **did** Peter preach that day????? Well, there were some things he touched on, and some things he concentrated on, and of course that may change, depending on the audience, one is preaching to:

1. Firstly, he preached that there is no partiality with God.
35 ... in every nation **anyone** who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to [God].

It doesn't matter what your upbringing is. It doesn't matter what your nationality is – your race – the colour of your skin.... It doesn't matter whether you're an employer or an employee, or unemployed. It doesn't matter whether you're rich or poor; educated or uneducated; city or country; None of that matters. God examines the heart, and He's looking for hearts, that are open to Him.

2. Secondly, he proclaimed the anointing of Jesus Christ, with the power of God.

³⁸ ... *God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power.....*

That means, Jesus is unique – He is the chosen one – He is the anointed one. He is the one appointed by God, and we can trust in Him. Cornelius had **begun** to know God, But God had revealed Himself more fully in the person of Jesus Christ. And so, if Cornelius wanted to get to know God better, then Cornelius needed to get to know God's anointed one – Jesus of Nazareth.

3. Thirdly, he touched on the works that Jesus did, during His ministry years

He did good, and **undid** evil – He **undid** the oppression of the Devil.

4. And then he touched on the death of Jesus

All he said was:

They put Him to death by hanging him on a tree...

That's all Peter had to say about His death.

5. But Jesus did not **stay** dead, and in proclaiming the resurrection, well this is where Peter concentrates his efforts. He says:

- God raised Him on the 3rd day.
- God made Him to appear – not to everybody – but to those who had been chosen by God to be witnesses.
- He said that these witnesses ate and drank with Him after He'd been raised from the dead... - Alright, there's no doubt about it – Jesus is alive – ghosts don't eat your tucker
- And then the risen Lord Jesus, commanded his witnesses, to preach and to testify, 2 things.

Alright, he was very specific about the resurrection.

6. And so sixthly, as commanded, they preached that this risen Jesus, has been appointed by God to judge the living and the dead.

7. And also as commanded, they preached that everyone who believes in Jesus Christ, receives forgiveness of sins, in the name of Jesus.

8. Then, those who believed were filled with the Holy Spirit.

9. And they were baptised in the Name of Jesus Christ.

Now, on this Easter Sunday (this Resurrection Sunday) - Why is it so important that Jesus **was** raised from the dead????

Well, after His resurrection, when Jesus met with His chosen witnesses, he commanded them two things to preach:

- that He's been appointed by God to judge the living and the dead; and
- that those who believe in Him, receive forgiveness of sins in His name....

And, if Jesus **wasn't** raised from the dead, then neither of those two things would be true... It wouldn't be true that He was coming back to judge the living and the dead. It wouldn't be true that we receive forgiveness in His Name, or that we even needed to...

But Jesus **was** raised from the dead, and so both those things **are** true, and we **must** take notice of them.

Easter Sunday is a time of hope for those who believe in Jesus, because when we believe, we're forgiven, and we believe that He's coming back again...

But that should also flag for us, a bit of a problem for those who **don't** believe in Jesus... If you don't believe in Jesus, well Easter Sunday is not a celebration for you – it's a day of despair... Because the resurrection, is the sign that God has appointed Jesus as judge,, and only those who believe in Him, are prepared for it...

In the 1880's, German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche pronounced: "God is dead" And believe it or not, some people find a lot of security in that... You see, if I go through life, with the view that God is dead, then I'm not accountable to anyone, am I. But one witty bumper-sticker says it all:

*"God is dead" – Nietzsche 1883.
"Nietzsche is dead" – God 1900.*

*Because one thing's for sure – Nietzsche **is** dead. He died, a madman, at the age of 55.
And 2 things for sure – God's not dead – He's surely alive.*

And that means we **are** accountable to someone – we're accountable to the same living God who saved us – the Lord Jesus Christ.

And it's not only those who believe in Jesus, who are accountable to Him... Jesus doesn't go away if I simply ignore Him... He said that He was coming again to judge the living **and** the dead.

And so the message that Peter preached that day, are the words of life, because "yes, Jesus is coming back to judge the living and the dead"... But before He comes as "Judge", He comes as "Saviour"...

And the message for us today, is the same as then:
"Everyone who believes in Jesus Christ, receives forgiveness of sins, through His name."

You don't want to meet Jesus the judge, unless you first get to know Jesus as saviour...

Happy Easter everyone. Jesus is risen.

And today I pray that you will:

- Rejoice in your forgiveness.
- Rejoice in the Life of Christ.
- Rejoice in the life that He has given you.
- And rejoice, that He is coming again.

Amen.