

I chose you

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Easter 6 – Acts 10 44-48 & John 15 v 16a

I had a conversation on Friday with a Hindu friend about an American conservative Christian group that contacted him. Many of their views worried him: vehement condemnation of gender diversity; unconditional opposition to abortion; absolute support for Zionist political and military supremacy; denial of climate-change science; opposition to gun control. They preach a political and moralistic agenda to impose these views on entire populations. My friend and I agreed that these sorts of views and agendas are expressed not only by conservative Christians, but also by conservative Hindus, Muslims and Buddhists.

So how does anyone enter into productive dialogue with militant puritans? How do I talk with someone from my own religious tradition when I think they're preaching a message Jesus would not endorse? Who am I to think that? How do I respond to the fires lit by these media-savvy people when they make inflammatory public statements and claim they speak for the whole Church?

How? Bp Jack Spong used to say, we have to know scripture really well. And I find that our scriptures today are a good place to start; particularly the reading from Acts. Today's reading needs more context to make much sense of it. It's the third in a sequence of stories where Luke describes the infant Church suddenly receiving, as full members, people who'd never have been accepted into Jewish fellowship. These three stories paint a picture of a religion with no fences; no borders.

Last Sunday's reading from Acts (the second in this sequence of three) ended with Philip baptising an Ethiopian eunuch. We were told an angel had commanded Philip to go to the road

between Jerusalem and Gaza so he'd meet this person. The eunuch had been to Jerusalem to worship, and was on his way home in his chariot. As they met, Philip heard him reading out loud from the prophet Isaiah.

This was a person who was drawn to the Jewish belief in one, universal God. In the language of Acts, he was a God-fearer; someone who revered the one true God. But as one of our zoom study group reminded us, Hebrew law forbade a eunuch from being accepted into Jewish fellowship, no matter how deep his faith. ^{Deut 23.1} So when he was in Jerusalem, the closest this eunuch would have got to joining in worship would have been from one of the outer courts of the Temple.

God obviously had other plans for him, and sent Philip to meet him. Philip baptised the eunuch, making him a full member of the Church.

God chose an Ethiopian eunuch – a gender-diverse foreigner – to become one of the first non-Jews ever to become a member of the Church. We heard Jesus in today's gospel say, *You didn't choose me; I chose you.* ^{Jn 15.16} This Ethiopian, along with the Samaritans Philip had baptised just days earlier, and today, the Roman centurion Cornelius and his guests who Peter is compelled to baptise – these show that God wants us to be a faith community with no border police. These stories tell us that from the beginning, the Church was called to be open to diversity. You could almost say *we're the fish John West reject.*

But I haven't given you the context of today's story where Peter was interrupted mid-sermon by the Holy Spirit falling on all his foreign listeners. It's a story that started with two people having visions. The centurion Cornelius was told in a vision to send for a stranger called Simon Peter. And Peter in a trance state was told (three times!) to abandon kosher dietary laws. Eat anything with anyone; everything's clean if

God says it is! No sooner does he come out of his trance than Cornelius' messengers appear and the next day, he and his associates go and visit foreigners.

As they talk, the penny starts to drop for Peter. He's invited to speak to the household, and he starts to preach about God showing no partiality about anyone's ethnicity. That's a good start. He goes on to speak about the ministry of Jesus, about his death and resurrection. But then he starts to suggest that only he and some chosen others were selected as witnesses and preachers. This is not looking good. He doesn't seem to be making the connection between his first words about God's multicultural revolution and the people in front of him – not like Philip did with the Samaritans and the Ethiopian eunuch.

Peter is slowly returning to the idea that *everyone* (note that word) *everyone* who believes in Jesus will receive release from sins through his name ... and it's just after this that we enter the story today ... when suddenly, the Holy Spirit precipitates the finale, falling on all the foreigners, and giving them spiritual gifts of speaking in tongues and extolling God; and this before they'd even been baptised!

This little sequence of three stories – Philip baptising Samaritans – the ancient heretics despised by the Jewish scholars; Philip baptising the Ethiopian eunuch – so much for those ancient rules; and today, Peter compelled to baptise Romans who were the modern enemy colonisers. These stories all say what Jesus says in the Gospel; you didn't choose me. I chose you. No conservative agenda can exclude anyone Jesus has chosen. Jesus does the choosing. Praise God for his love! Amen.