

Holy Trinity Sunningdale
Sunday May 9, 2021 - 6th Sunday of Easter
Reading – Acts10:44-48

This morning let me begin with a question which I will also answer for you. “Do you discriminate?” The simple answer is yes. Now before you get mad at me, let me explain. The Equality Act 2010 protects 9 characteristics from discrimination which include age; gender, disability, race, religion, sexual orientation and so on. The fact that there is a legislation to protect certain groups of people shows the need to keep us in line when it comes to discrimination.

When I worked at the Institute of Education, University College London, by complete chance I wrote and delivered training programs on equality and diversity. More recently the demands have increased for training on race and diversity. Whenever my training is on race, you can cut the tension in the room with a knife. As soon as I show my black face, the body languages of the participants speak volumes and I hear, “Here we go again – bla-bla-bla on white privilege and how our ancestors were slave traders and responsible for the woes of Africa,” and they get ready to tell me to get over it! I diffuse the tension with a question – “If the whole world is one race, one colour, one gender, one religion, one ability etc., would there still be discrimination?” Majority will answer yes.

Justin Welby – the Archbishop of Canterbury, commenting on the anti-racism taskforce report and the disturbing BBC Panorama program admitted that the Church of England is institutionally racist. Psychology also agree because our brains are wired for bias. Most of the time it is unconscious – I am sure you have heard of unconscious bias. We are all vulnerable to bias but the good news is that we don’t have to act on it!

When it comes to how we are supposed to treat people, God gives us clear answers. Peter had a vision that what he thought was unclean was not unclean. An angel told Cornelius to send for Peter; and the Holy Spirit told Peter to go. There are 3 key lessons from our reading today on how not to discriminate against others.

Our 1st lesson is on humility. Peter had a wall of prejudice built in him over the years of his training in Judaism. Gentiles were unclean, and to associate with them was to defile yourself. Peter had spent 3 years with Jesus, and yet he still had a narrow racist attitude. It took a direct revelation from God to get Peter to change the pattern of racism in his life.

Peter went with the 3 men and some of the Christians from Joppa went with him. Peter was a Jew and Cornelius was a Gentile. Jewish people considered themselves better than Gentiles but God made it clear to Peter that he was not to call any man common. All people are equal before God. Equally, we are all sinners in need of the grace of God.

Peter went into the house and found a large group of people. He asked them if they were aware that it was against Jewish Law for a Jew to associate with Gentiles; but before they answered, he told them that God had showed him that they were not unclean just because they were Gentiles. Peter humbled himself and went to people that most of his life he was told not to associate with. He was humbled by the lesson God taught him.

Our 2nd lesson is not show favouritism. In other words, we should not judge a book by its cover or stereotype people based on how they look or where they came from. After hearing why Cornelius had sent for him, Peter's response was that God shows no favouritism. We are to see people through the eyes of God and God looks at peoples' hearts and not what nation they are from, even if it means to break with all that we have been taught by parents, church or society. This is what Peter did when he entered the home of Cornelius. God demanded that Peter break with the traditions of Judaism. Christianity was to be inclusive of all peoples. It was shocking to the Jewish Christians that even the Gentiles were given the Holy Spirit. Apparently, the Holy Spirit considered them to be worthy of the Gospel just as the Jews!

Our 3rd lesson is to understand that God's plan includes everyone. In Cornelius' house that day a new chapter in Christian history was written. A Jewish Christian leader and a Gentile Christian convert discovered something significant about God at work in the other person. Before Peter can give an "altar call" God pours out the Holy Spirit on the Gentiles. The gift of the Holy Spirit did not follow the expected form of – Repent; Be baptised; Receive the Holy Spirit. A major step has been taken, a major barrier crossed! Cornelius needed Peter and his Gospel to be saved. Peter needed Cornelius and his salvation experience to know Gentiles were included in God's plan. Has it ever crossed your mind that you and I may also need each other to understand how God works!

I love the last part of verse 48. "Then they asked Peter to stay with them for a few days." Peter went from, "I really shouldn't be here, but God made me" to staying with them for several days. What a change God can make in our hearts if only we allow him!

How can we allow God to make this change? We must be willing to listen and be shown when and where we have biases. We must acknowledge this before God and anticipate the joy of entering into heartfelt relationship with those who are different. We must commit to a willingness to follow Peter's example for the sake of the Gospel.

As you hear and see things this week concerning discrimination, I pray that you would remember these 3 important lessons, to be humble, not considering ourselves better than others, to not show favouritism – or stereotype people based on what they look like or where they come from, to remember that God's plan includes everyone. Amen.

Dolapo Ogunbawo