

Address by Belinda Speed-Andrews for 15th May 2022

Clichés abound when it comes to talking about change. "Change is not an event, it's a process." "Change is inevitable." "Change or die" - is often used in reference to organizations, and often in reference to the Church, and more particularly to congregations that are in decline.

Regardless of its inevitability, few people like or welcome change. The majority of us like our routines that come over time. We read our newspaper (or news via the Internet) at the same time in the morning and drink our coffee out of that same mug deeply stained with years of use. We have our rituals and routines that keep us on track and on time. We have our schedules so engrained, and how we operate so fine-tuned that the slightest changes throw off our morning and determine the quality of our day. The number of times I have forgotten to take my medication because I have eschewed my morning routine.

Routines provide a level of comfort and security. We know where to go and what to expect. The inevitability of change though means we have to make adjustments we are oftentimes not ready or not willing to make. The early Christians were having such a moment. They were accustomed to what they knew and when confronted with change, they too were resistant.

The early church was in the process of being formed. In the wake of the resurrection, these followers of Christ were sticking to what they knew for living, even as they adjusted to the death of Jesus, the absence of his leadership, and sought to spread his teaching.

As followers of Jesus, they were Jews. They were well versed in the dietary laws. They knew what they were supposed to eat and drink. They knew who was welcome and with whom they should not associate. They gathered regularly, kept to what they knew, and believed that the gospel, the Good News Jesus left for them to share, was exclusively for them.

The text in Acts 11:1-18 is a retelling of Acts 10 from a different perspective. We learn of Peter's vision in Acts 10, his vision of heaven opening and a large sheet descending, lowered by its four corners (v.11). "In it were all kinds of four-footed creatures and reptiles and birds of the air" (v.12).

Peter is then invited to kill and eat (v.13). The vision comes to a hungry Peter as he prays in the middle of the day on a rooftop. It is there that Peter meets Cornelius.

According to the Jewish dietary laws, some of these animals were named "unclean" and should not be eaten if one was to maintain one's purity and holiness. The feast that is offered to a hungry Peter is a feast of which he thought he should not partake. The invitation for Peter to partake of these animals in his vision is a larger invitation for Peter to accept the invitation that arrives for him to visit the home of Cornelius.

There were rules for this too. In addition to restrictions on food, the law also stipulated who a Jew could share a meal with. The act of "breaking bread together" was a sacred moment. Sitting at table was a spiritual moment where God was present. A person therefore could not render that moment profane by eating with people who were considered unclean.

Jews could not share a meal at table, nor would they visit the home of an individual who was not observing the same dietary restrictions. The home would be unclean, so under the law Peter was not allowed to visit with Cornelius.

Under the law, Cornelius' kitchen would be unclean, so Peter should not be eating in Cornelius' home. These though are not the focus of contention that Peter has to deal with. Instead it is Cornelius himself, a high-ranking Roman soldier, who was at the heart of the problem.

"When Peter came up to Jerusalem those who were of Jewish birth took issue with him. 'You have been visiting men who are uncircumcised,' they said, 'and sitting at the table with them!' Peter began by laying before them the facts as they had happened" (Acts 11:4).

The Jerusalem believers took issue with Peter's actions. "These objectors did not take issue with the baptism of Gentiles but with Peter's willingness to associate and eat with them. The intimacy and sacredness of "table fellowship" was the concern of the community. There are some people that you do not eat with. Perhaps there are people that we exclude from the table albeit unwittingly? The reality of table fellowship is as much about Holy Communion as table, as it is about those with whom we break bread and share fellowship in our homes. The challenges of table fellowship occur in these two areas.

The problem the early church had with Peter's actions was not the baptism of Cornelius but commensality, the act of sharing your table with others. It is often hard to do. Would we want to share table with the homeless who are not clean? Or even

with people above us in class and status who we perhaps see as snooty, or even dare I say it share with those who we see as beneath us, with dodgy table manners?

So questions come to mind? What do our worship communities look like and who do we extend hospitality to in our churches and in our homes? Are we willing to be transformed by those who we have yet to include?

We could all use more diversity of relationships in our lives. And if we did, are we willing to receive the transformation that happens as a result of that welcome of diversity? Or are we resting on rituals and relationships that we hold as sacred that have transfixed us in static realities rather than in the dynamic realities of transformation that promises to make our lives that much richer? I have recently had an email conversation with the Archdeacon about us regularly offering signing for the deaf for our services. If we are honest and look around now at those sitting here this morning, how diverse are we? We may be diverse in our theological understandings, or in our professions, but how diverse could we be? What little changes could we make to be truly diverse?

God is doing a new thing.

In Acts 11:1-18, Peter is now in Jerusalem and he is re-telling the events of his time in Joppa and his encounter with Cornelius to justify his actions and to help the gathered community in Jerusalem come to a new understanding of life in Christ, and the reasons for what he did. "What is significant about this passage is that God is now doing something new and radical that seems to have caught both the disciples and other Jews by surprise" (Simone Sunghae Kim, *Preaching God's Transforming Justice Year C*).

These chapters are often received among us as "The Conversion of Cornelius and His Household." His entire household comes to know about Jesus. Their lives are transformed, they are converted to this new way of understanding Divine grace and presence by Peter. It is easy to see that these individuals hold a significant place in the life of the early church. The reception of the Gentiles is a big part of the story.

But there is more that may be harder for us to accept. Yes, these chapters are about conversion, but they are more about a transformation that takes place across the life of the Church. Peter and the entire Jerusalem church are converted to a new way of thinking as a result of Peter's vision and his visit to Cornelius' home.

What would transformation look like in the communities we serve? What would our own personal transformation look like as we critically examine our lives and

communities? Do we ask the question: who is missing? Perhaps the deeper question is: who are we excluding and what are the mechanisms, tools, rituals, language, and behaviours that we employ to ensure that they receive the coded messages that indicate they are not welcome - that we have named them unclean?

The result of Divine encounter is transformation, deep change that moves us to think differently and live differently.

Transformation is through change that is dramatic in nature. When I think of transformation, the change of the life cycle of the butterfly comes to mind, significant change that is visible, and more often than not painful in the letting go of the comfort of the known and struggling with the uncertainty and process of change.

Transformation hinges on self-awareness and truth telling. How self-aware and truthful is the Church of England? Are we self-aware but not willing to let that transformation happen because it is too painful and it means letting go of long-held beliefs that no longer have a place in our faith communities? In the not letting go we are therefore willing to let good people be hurt, people whom God loves as much as he loves us. The reluctance to see ourselves as we are hinders the transformative work that is rooted in grace. The reluctance to name the places where we are deficient in our hospitality, whether that is racial, gender, age, sexual discrimination, and to own that we are aspirational and have much work to do in ourselves and in our community causes us to embrace a false narrative that forces God among us to the margins - unwelcome at the table; unclean.

The church leaders heard Peter's story of his transformation. They heard of the transformation of Cornelius and his household. It seems they finally got it. "When they heard this, they were silenced. And they praised God saying, 'Then God has given even to the Gentiles the repentance that leads to life'" (Acts 11:18). What a relief that they were now willing to receive the Gentiles among them.

God is full of surprises. Where will our surprises come and our knowledge of God's ways increase, so that we too may say "God has given even to..."?