

The story of Peter at Joppa

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The story of Peter at Joppa

(from Acts chapter 10)

This story is a basic text from Christianity to explain why it is a religion for all people, from every nation, no matter what their skin colour or ethnicity might be.

2000 years ago, when the Christian church was new, its first members were Jewish like Jesus had been. They followed the Jewish laws about food and they didn't eat with people who were not Jewish. Maybe some of them were prejudiced against non-Jewish people, who they called 'Gentiles.' Maybe there were even some reasons for Jewish people to dislike Gentiles.

But things had to change. People from all sorts of different backgrounds and ethnicities wanted to follow Jesus. They were starting to convert to Christianity.

One of them was a Roman soldier, a centurion called Cornelius, in charge of 100 troops. He and his family already believed in one God and tried to live generously and prayerfully. Of course, many Jewish people had reasons to be suspicious of the Romans and their armies. And it was the Romans who had crucified Jesus. Cornelius had a message from an angel about talking with Peter, Jesus' disciple, and he sent servants to invite Peter to meet with him.

Peter was now one of the leaders of the new church. Before Cornelius' servants arrived at the house where Peter was staying, he had a vision. He had gone up to the roof of the house to pray in the afternoon, and he fell asleep. In his dream he saw a great big sheet, let down from heaven. In the sheet there were all kinds of animal foodstuffs – all the ones which Jewish people are not allowed to eat. Peter heard a voice, which he recognised as from God: 'Get up Peter, and eat!' 'Never!' he replied. 'I have never eaten these kinds of dirty foods. I'm Jewish!'

In the dream the same thing happened three times. Then he woke up. While he was still wondering what this dream meant (he did not forget it!), his visitors arrived. The Centurion's servants explained why they had come. "Our master Cornelius has sent us. He is a Roman Centurion and he wants you to come and visit him and bring the message of Jesus. He wants to be a Christian, even though he's a Roman."

Suddenly, Peter realised what his dream meant: if God sent Gentiles to him asking about Jesus, it would be wrong of him to say 'they are dirty, unclean, foreigners to God'. 'Now I get it' he thought 'God is telling me that people of all different nations can come to Christ.' He agreed to go and meet Cornelius, and when he got there, he shared the Gospel of Jesus with the Gentiles. He said to them: 'Certainly, I now understand that God shows no favouritism.' He had learned a big lesson.

Cornelius and all his household became Christians, and from then onwards the Christian community was not just open to Jewish people, but to all people. The religion Jesus had started was not to be a racist religion, but one where people from every nation and tribe were united in worship and faith. Christianity is a religion where people from every nation and tribe are united in worship and faith. It is a religion that speaks out against racism and encourages love. The Christians did not always follow this teaching, but it is in the Bible, and can make a difference today.

Peter and Cornelius: a story with many meanings

Here are four different ideas about the main meanings of the story.

Read each one aloud in a group of three and discuss together what it is saying.

Rank them: which ones do you think give the best interpretation of the story?

“I think the main point of this story is that God showed Cornelius what to do next. This Roman was already a good person, and gave to charity, but he wanted something more from life. That is why God gave him the vision, and why he became a Christian.”

“This story matters to Christians very much because it is the moment when the new religion of Jesus stopped being ‘just for Jewish people’ and became something for everyone. Today there are over 2.4 billion Christians. It started with Cornelius.”

“The story has 2 meanings. It’s about Cornelius becoming a Christian and Peter realising that God has no favourites. God loves everyone the same, Jewish or Gentile. The Spirit of God sends visions and dreams to make these two things happen. I can’t guess who learned the most, whether it was Peter or Cornelius.”

“The first Christians were all Jewish and they may have been prejudiced against the Gentiles. This story is in the Bible because it tells all Christians that they mustn’t be racist. Just as God loves and forgives everyone, so all Christians must accept humans, whatever people or tribe they are

Complete these 4 sentences to give your own understanding of the story

- A. Peter might have been alarmed by Cornelius, the Roman Centurion, because...
- B. The meaning of Peter’s vision of the sheet full of forbidden food was...
- C. Peter said ‘I now understand that God shows no favouritism.’ I think he meant...
- D. What might Christians today learn from this story? I think...



Changing your mind: it's the only way to learn

When have your thoughts been challenged and changed? If we never change our minds, then we never really learn!

Think of a time when someone or something really made you think... what happened? **Share your experience with a friend and fill in the grid below.**

I used to think...	But now...
I used to worry about...	But now...
I used to be scared of...	But now...
I used to laugh at...	But now...
I used to see...	But now...
I used to be...	But now...

Sometimes people grow up to be scared of those who are different – maybe Peter was like that in the story. But the voice of God changed his mind. If Christian churches follow the example of Peter, they should never be racist, because god has no favourites.

Design a 'Welcome' poster to go outside a church that expresses this idea.