

Encounter with Jesus – Cornelius

In these services we are looking at people who have had an encounter with Jesus and the effect the encounter had on them. We have looked at several people who met Jesus physically during his ministry, through others after his death and in the Old Testament. Last time we looked at Martha, and the time before at Mary, her sister. Tonight we are moving forward to Acts, to look at Cornelius, a soldier as yesterday was Armed Forces Day. Hilary is going to read us his story.

Acts 10:1-48

Who was Cornelius?

We are told he was a centurion in the Italian Regiment, based at Caesarea. Centurions commanded units of roughly eighty men (not 100 as you might think). Unlike the aristocratic Patricians who could directly become tribunes or legates (the higher ranks, ie. generals), centurions were generally soldiers who worked their way up through the ranks. His century was one of 6 in a "regiment" or cohort of approximately six hundred men and there were 10 cohorts in a Legion. At this time (around AD 40) there was one Legion in Palestine, five cohorts (half the Legion) were stationed in Caesarea, the residence of the Roman governor of Judea, another in Jerusalem and the remaining 4 were in other garrisons. Military service was the preferred occupation in the Roman Empire; only roughly half those who enlisted survived the twenty years of service, but the rewards for survivors were high, including pensions and grants of land. Noncitizens could not join legions but could become auxiliary troops who received citizenship upon their discharge. To reach the rank of centurion, the highest a non-Patrician could go, Cornelius must have been a good and experienced soldier. Although ordinary soldiers could retire after their normal term of service, centurions were only discharged when they were no longer fit for their posts. Cornelius could therefore have been relatively old, probably in his late 40s or even 50s.

Cornelius is not a full convert to Judaism, but his almsgiving and the appreciation of Jews who know him testify to his devotion to God. The term "God-fearer" is generally used for righteous Gentiles who had not been circumcised, the requirement to become a full Jew. Inscriptions found indicate a high level of religious interest among many of the soldiers. There were only about 60 centurions in the Legion in Palestine, but two are mentioned specifically in the gospels or ACTS as being God fearers or men of faith, one being praised by Jesus as having more faith than anyone in Israel.

Cornelius' "household" is of interest. Rank and file soldiers were not permitted to marry, although they commonly had illegal concubines whom superiors ignored, as they were stationed in the same place for a long time. They were also given leave to go back to Rome periodically. However there is some evidence that the wives and children of centurions lived with them at border and provincial forts, a privilege of rank. The passage does say Cornelius had called together his relatives and close friends, so it may be he was one of the lucky ones to have his family with him. The term "household" would also include the "servants" and slaves. Cornelius sent two servants and "a devout soldier" to fetch Peter, so may have been included in the gathering.

How did he encounter Jesus?

This encounter was clearly initiated by God sending an Angel to give Cornelius a message. He was a devout man and prayed regularly (3 in the afternoon was the Jewish time of prayer). The vision he had was quite clear and he acted on it immediately by ending the servants and soldier to fetch Peter. God was also preparing Peter for the encounter, since he would almost certainly have refused to go with them if he hadn't had the vision and heard the Spirit tell him to go. He even tells Cornelius this when he arrives at his house. Even Jews who were most lenient in other regards kept to the kosher rules about food. This vision would present a horrifying

situation for any first-century Jew: God commands Peter to eat all these unclean, forbidden creatures. He may have been hungry, but he is not *that* hungry! The point of the vision, that God can declare anything clean, applies especially to the Gentiles Peter is about to meet. Strict Jews would not enter a Gentile's house or allow a Gentile in theirs. Peter therefore faces a problem in being invited to Cornelius' house. Although more lax Jews would probably not object, Peter has to be concerned about stricter elements within the Jewish church, which eventually included even Pharisees. They were concerned about eating with Gentiles; Eating with them was forbidden on the principle that they were evil company. Lodging Gentiles overnight, no matter how exhausted the guests may have been, contradicted strict Jewish piety. So even before he goes to Cornelius' house Peter is being obedient to God's vision by entertaining the men. He may have been more open to this than others, because he had been with Jesus when he spoke with the Samaritan Woman and healed the centurion's servant. But this is God preparing the ground to expand the church throughout the Roman Empire by making Peter realise the gift of salvation is for all people, not just the Jews.

What happened during the encounter?

Apart from having the initial vision, Cornelius has the faith to gather his relatives and friends and prepare them to hear what God has to say through Peter – "Now we are all here in the presence of God to listen to everything the Lord has commanded you to tell us". Peter delivers his talk, giving testimony and proclaiming that Jesus has been raised from the dead and that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name. At this point a second Pentecost occurs, the Holy Spirit comes on all who heard the message and they praised God and spoke in tongues. This astonishes the Jewish believers who had come with Peter – it turns their world view upside down. Jewish people believed that Gentiles could be saved by converting to Judaism; and the church at this time was requiring them to do so, as they were only going to the Jews. Until now no one had believed that Gentiles could be saved on the same terms as the Jews, who had been chosen for salvation by God's sovereign grace. Peter then accepts them as fellow Christians and commands that they are baptised in the name of Jesus Christ. The universal church of Christ effectively comes into being at this point.

What effect did the encounter have on Cornelius and the Church?

The obvious effect is that Cornelius and all those gathered there in his house who heard the message, i.e. believed, received the Holy Spirit just as the Apostles had on Pentecost. They are baptised and maybe they form the first church in Caesarea, the Roman capital of Judea. We don't have any more details, although Phillip is recorded as having been there before this encounter. They did ask Peter to stay with them a few days, almost certainly to receive more instruction and hear his first-hand account of being with Jesus. The wider implications of this encounter however are huge. When Peter gets back to Jerusalem he has to give an account of his actions to the other Apostles and the believers there. When they hear his report they marvel that God has given "even the Gentiles" the gift of salvation and the Holy Spirit. This revolutionised the church and would lead to conflicts and debate for some time, even Peter gets rebuked later by Paul for drawing back from eating with Gentiles to avoid being criticised by the circumcision group in the church. The key point is that although salvation started with the Jews it is now offered to all mankind, with no pre-conditions except belief in Jesus.

Discussion – There are two questions for us here which I would like you to discuss in your groups and we'll then have a short feedback from each group:

What "hang-ups" or prejudices do we have about people becoming Christians?

Are we open to God wanting to do something completely different to bring in others to the kingdom?