

Hello everyone

Last week we finished a series of holiday stories from members of the congregation. Today we are thinking of how people can be with you at important points in your life to point things out to you.

And it is always good when someone gives your thinking a bit of a jog, isn't it?

After Norma heard my very short ideal holiday story on the Wednesday break she gave me a bit of a nudge. I was surprised she said, I thought your ideal holiday would've been a train trip.

Well she's actually spot on. She was referring to the holiday that was vetoed by the family a few years ago when I had suggested a train trip from Aberdeen to Penzance with an overnight stay in Penzance before boarding the return journey to Aberdeen. It seems to have a bit of niche appeal to it, but sadly no one else in the manse was in that niche with me.

When Norma nudged my memory it involved a travel story and I found I myself thinking of the story we read today in a slightly different way. It's all about prayer.

Cornelius, a Roman soldier and Peter are two people who don't know each other yet are nudged by God to find each other.

Cornelius was a gentile, but he was committed to the God of Israel. However, he had come to know God within the circle around Jesus the Messiah and he wanted nothing more than to join in that circle, but that wasn't possible because he had not been circumcised and as a Roman soldier he would have difficulties complying with the food laws and observing the Jewish prayer times and rituals.

He prays constantly to God about his longings and at the same times helps out the poor.

Both of which are actions that Luke sees as critical to keeping the two commandments as you follow Jesus. Worship God and help those in need.

One day he is praying at one of the times expected in the temple.

When an angel appears, quite a common occurrence in Luke's writing

Think of Zechariah or Mary or Paul or the shepherds, The angel calls him by name

Cornelius.

And as is usual when Luke writes of angels, he is terrified by the angel's appearance.

The angel's message is simple and direct.

Your prayers have been noticed by God

Yes, but more than that your help for the poor has been noted too.

Although Cornelius is a Gentile, he keeps the important commandments Luke is telling us.

Something is going to happen, but as yet we don't know how God is going to respond to Cornelius' prayer.

He is told to send somebody to Joppa for a message to a man called Peter. Ask him to come and see you.

This seems like an act of faith for Cornelius.

But God knows all about connecting people for a season.

Cornelius sends three people who share his faith to Joppa

And the scene moves to Joppa.

To a house where Peter is praying on the roof.

Simon has a vision where god is trying to tell him something shocking.

That's not how we do things God. Peter has seen a large sheet full of animals being lowered from heaven and god telling him to eat.

No way, Lord, Peter says.

Never have I eaten anything unholy or unclean.

It's a difficult idea for us to day to get hold of

The idea that some foods are unclean and others not.

This is something much stronger than just good hygiene.

This goes to the heart of Peter's relationship with God.

This is a big deal for faithful Peter. This about obeying Torah. Who are we to overthrow the laws Moese was given back in the book of Leviticus.

The purity laws, they are called.

Again, a friend for a season helped me see the importance of these laws.

It's about faithfulness. Eating unholy food unclean food is like cheating on God just as adultery is cheating on your partner.

When it comes to the purity laws we are on very holy not environmental ground.

Read the story slowly and you discover Peter is asked to slaughter and eat unholy food three times.

It's a pattern in Peter's life – being spoken to three times.

Three times he denied Jesus.

Three times he was asked to feed his lambs.

God seems to be trying to make Peter understand something.

Gentile lambs belong to God's flock too.

Then he hears voices below

Does Simon the tanner live here and is it possible he has Simon Peter as a guest with him?

Cornelius' colleagues have arrived to deliver the dream message from God.

Two men at prayer have been thrown together.

Needs we hope are to be met.

Luke shows us that while our prayer is unique, we are also all linked by prayer

And that's exciting. There are no secrets when it comes to being Christian.

In fact when it comes to being Christian what is central is prayer.

It's like using the correct language if you're in UK or France or Germany.

When it comes to God, the language we use is prayer

And through prayer

God puts us together so that we understand each other even if we are miles apart.

But we are not just talking about church prayers

Everyday prayers like the ones Cornelius and Peter are engaged in are just as useful when it comes to God finding helpful people for a season for us.

And we don't have to be good at prayer.

The only rule is to start praying

And we do that by telling God how we are feeling.

Just like Cornelius and Peter did that day.

Peter heard voices down below

Does Simon the tanner live here and is Peter staying as a guest?

God is sending an answer to prayer.

We will look in more detail at that answer next week

But suffice it to say these prayers will prove to have life changing consequences for the men.

And in the long run for many others right down the centuries to us today.

People often say rather glibly watch what you pray for, it may just happen.

Well for Peter and Cornelius we will see what happens next week, but what about you?

What are you praying for?

And is God urging to go and see someone who might be able to help you out?

Peace be with you.

Amen