

**May 18, 2025
Church of All Nations
Acts 11:1-18**

We had an awkward situation few years ago at the Brimbank Interfaith Council's bus tour of local worship places. A vision impaired man's guide dog was refused entry to one of the places of worship. In some cultures and religions dogs are considered unclean, and while the strictness of the prohibition can vary from situation to situation and the views of the particular religious community, in this case the dog was not permitted in the worship space. And I realise this was probably against the laws of the land.

Understandably the man was greatly offended and insulted. Interesting situation. Some religious, devout people are offended by the thought of a dog in their sacred space while another person is offended by their offence.

Reminds me a tad of the religious freedom debates going on where my right to express my views, objectionable or not versus your right not to be insulted or discriminated against.

Between Easter and Pentecost the first reading in our lectionary is always from the Book of Acts - stories of the emergence and spread of the early church - people of The Way; disciples of the resurrected Jesus. And today the story centres on what is offensive and ritually unclean. Focus is food but clearly we are meant to be seeing this as a larger discussion about people and their inclusion or not in the Christian faith.

Religions historically have spent a good deal of time dividing people, objects, behaviour into what is holy and pure in contrast to what is defiled. In Leviticus you can read whole chapters in the so called purity code of what is acceptable and unacceptable. The birth of the Christian faith brought major convulsions in this area.

Today's event which reads to us like a minor squabble over ancient food laws, is nothing less than a most significant event in the early church. The question can be put starkly; is the gospel of Jesus Christ for all or is it to remain within the Jewish world? It was this issue that was going to decide if the Christian church remained a sect within Judaism, competing with the Pharisees, the Sadducees, the Essenes, the Zealots,

and then there would also have been another Jewish group -the Christians, or would it leap the boundaries and spill over into the wider Gentile world. So this is a big story of the Acts of the Apostles.

The Jewish Christians (if we can call them that) think Peter has gone rogue. “So when Peter went up to Jerusalem, the circumcised believers criticized him and said, ‘You went into the house of the uncircumcised and ate with them.’”

They might also have said, “You betrayed your identity. You did not remain set-apart. You broke our food laws. Without that, we don’t know how to be followers of God in the world.

Think of the distinguishing marks of Judaism - Torah (Law), think Sabbath observance, circumcision (mentioned in today’s reading), kosher food laws. More than a polite habit of observing certain food preferences. Fundamental to Jewish distinctiveness. When the Greeks wanted to obliterate the Jewish faith they commanded no distinctive practices could be observed and ordered suspect Jews to eat pork. Some resisted under pain of death rather than be violated by this unclean food. Macabees led the revolt.

In religion, and in society generally, we work on the principle that the unclean contaminates the clean. when something that is unpleasant, crude, vulgar, touches something clean, elegant, attractive the unclean reduces the clean to its level. This is called “negativity dominance”. When you get snot on a hamburger it does not make the snot taste delicious. The hamburger becomes ruined and gross. And the item is completely contaminated. If you bring two equal measures together you do not usually get a mildly or half contaminated final product. The little fully contaminates the plentiful.

So in today’s account, in a trance Peter sees a sheet lowered from heaven, full of ... well what he had been taught in the name of God-were unclean animals - and was ordered by this very same God to kill and eat.

The shattering, confusing and challenging thing – and ultimately life giving and liberating, is when God commands believers to break what have been assumed to be “God’s laws”! Yet this is what we see happening in the life of Jesus who consistently breaks the purity laws by his contact with people especially who are outside the acceptable standards. What we before called “negativity dominance” is presumed to operate and so to people like the Pharisees Jesus himself becomes tainted. It never occurs to them that the reverse may occur and Jesus may “cleanse” the sinners. And then Jesus goes on to explain about

how you are made unclean not by the food you eat or the people you associate with but by what is in your heart. And further he urges people to attend more to mercy than sacrifice, meaning God has more interest in the love in your heart than the food in your stomach or the isolating of yourself from tainted people. And further Jesus takes all the fearfulness out of living because in him all of us are made pure and holy.

Now for devout law abiding religious people who are dependent upon knowing who is in and who is out, and who suddenly find that the previous boundary markers no longer apply it can raise their anxiety levels. They will feel threatened, insecure and probably close ranks and attack those they perceive as a threat and who have come to challenge them. Does this not help explain what Jesus had to endure?

It all starts to come off the rails when the metaphor of cleanliness, drawing on the purity code, then gets easily transferred to the moral realm. People who eat different animals to us must be a bit morally questionable, people who engage in different sexual preferences and practices can evoke a disgust reaction. Mostly it is irrational, or at least pre or non rational. But as David Hume said, "Reason . . . is the slave of the passions." Our moral judgments tend to be quick and instinctive rather than well reasoned and reflective. Our reasoned explanations are often found to be ad hoc rationalizations for what we feel to be true in our guts. We dress them up with the aura of divine decree and now how heavy it will sit upon anyone forced to carry this load. These become boundary creating and monitoring exercises

And Jesus gives just one principle or distinguishing mark and one only. "Love one another. As I have loved you, so you should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another." That's it. There is no other distinguishing feature that is not directly related to that. Yes we are a people of justice, we are a people of mercy, we are a people of compassion. All that is love in action. "Love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another." The approach could be summed up by reference to a line from Jesus: "By their fruits you shall know them." This is the boundary marker. Any other boundary marker that is not directly related to this is not Christian.