

Sermon on the 6th Sunday in the Easter season (B)

(5th May 2024)

Now I realize, or: Why God is no partial.

Acts 10, 25-26.34-35.44-48

First reading from the Acts of the Apostles

²⁵ When Peter entered, Cornelius met him and, falling at his feet, paid him homage. ²⁶ Peter, however, raised him up, saying, "Get up. I myself am also a human being." ³⁴ Then Peter proceeded to speak and said, "In truth, I see that God shows no partiality. ³⁵ Rather, in every nation whoever fears him and acts uprightly is acceptable to him. ⁴⁴ While Peter was still speaking these things, the holy Spirit fell upon all who were listening to the word. ⁴⁵ The circumcised believers who had accompanied Peter were astounded that the gift of the holy Spirit should have been poured out on the Gentiles also, ⁴⁶ for they could hear them speaking in tongues and glorifying God. Then Peter responded, ⁴⁷ "Can anyone withhold the water for baptizing these people, who have received the holy Spirit even as we have?" ⁴⁸ He ordered them to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ.

Now I realize, truly now I realize. Peter probably hit his forehead with his hand because he realized something. Something that had not become clear to him before.

Dear brothers and sisters, the Acts of the Apostles, which tells us about the early days of the Christians,

relates a scene that is of immense importance to us. Here the book of Acts tells us about one of the first baptisms of a non-Jew - like us - who can be a Christian: Cornelius, a captain in the Roman army. How did this come about?

Cornelius was a man - we did not hear this in the reading today - who searched for God. The Acts of the Apostles describe him as God-fearing and righteous. Cornelius obviously had a thing for Judaism - but as a member of the occupying power, he probably couldn't belong to it. But Cornelius has a vision, as a result of which he sends a messenger to Peter and invites him.

Peter - a law-abiding Jew - had probably never been in the house of a non-Jew before. Jews do not associate with non-Jews - because that leads to impurity. This mindset - we don't associate with them - probably also made it difficult for young Christianity. Because even non-Jews found this belief in Christ interesting. But Peter also needs a vision - and he gets one - that allows him to respond to Cornelius' invitation. Peter visits Cornelius - the Jew visits the non-Jew.

Both have a vision. God wants to bring them both together. Cornelius is to call Peter, Peter is to come to Cornelius. And here we are at the point where our reading begins today. And Cornelius runs to get to Peter and throws himself at his feet. Peter seems uncomfortable: "*I myself am also a human being.*" (Acts 10:26) And Peter and Cornelius begin to talk - they share their experiences with God.

And this is where this meaningful sentence occurs: *"In truth, I see that God shows no partiality. Rather, in every nation whoever fears him and acts uprightly is acceptable to him."* (Acts 10:34-35) Peter learns from this point that he must examine his mindset towards others. Because for God there is no such thing as unclean - God declares clean. Peter needs to understand this, to mature, indeed he needs to grasp this insight. Peter recognizes that this God is greater than my idea of the world. For every person who fears him and does what is right is welcome. It is not the exercises of piety that are decisive, but attention to God and an orientation towards life that seeks the good. The decisive factor is the attempt to live a righteous life. Seen in this light, a number of people have more room in God's heart than we Christians might think. God's heart is wide towards people. This - "God does not look at the person" actually literally means being impartial. God does not divide into the one and the other. For him, there only seem to be people - his people.

And this God goes one better: God sends out his Holy Spirit. Just like at Pentecost, only to the Gentiles. And at this point Peter understands, his Jewish companions understand, that the Holy Spirit is there before the baptism. And baptism cannot be refused if the Holy Spirit has already come. God thinks ahead. And this is followed by the baptism of Cornelius and his own.

Peter learned that God does not divide but wants to have his people with him.

Cornelius learned that God does not divide but wants to have him with Him.

Peter's companions learned that God does not divide but welcomes everyone.

Perhaps you too will learn that God does not divide things into good and bad, but that he wants to have you with him in your efforts to lead a good life. Perhaps you need this "aha" experience - I need it far too often. Let's learn from his generosity! Let us learn from God's generosity - and imitate him. Let us have a big heart for his people.

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