



Sunday 28th November, 2021:

The story is told that in the Second World War an American soldier was killed and his friends went to bury him. Being close to a small French village they took his body to the local church to request that he be buried in the graveyard. However, on discovering that the fallen soldier was not a Roman Catholic, the priest said that he had to decline the request; however he could be buried on the land just outside the graveyard. This they did.

Some years after the end of the war the soldier's friends returned to the village to pay their respects, but on walking the perimeter of the graveyard they could no longer find the grave. Knocking at the priest's home they enquired as to why their friend's body had been moved. The priest explained. He had reflected on the rules which would not allow for a non-Roman Catholic to be buried in a catholic graveyard and he decided that this was quite wrong. So he had the fence moved. Their friend was now in the graveyard.

1. **Passages:**

Acts 10: 1-6, 9-16, 25-29, 34-48

Acts 11: 1-4, 16-18

Galatians 2:11-14

1 Corinthians 11:19-34

2. **Questions**

- a. Ashley suggested that Peter may well have wrestled in several ways with the issue of extending salvation to the gentiles. How have you engaged with the following when wrestling with an issue?
 - Is this just me – **my mind** playing tricks?
 - Is this just **culture** I've become beholden to?
 - What is truth here and how do I do the hard work **theologically** to work it out?
 - Scripturally, **biblically** how does this fit with the whole story of the Bible?
- b. Ashley suggested that in writing Galatians 3:27&28 Paul was showing that there is something indiscriminate about Christian faith. Do you agree?

- c. Reading the Bible as a community and not as individuals has been something of an epiphany for Ashley. Singing only 'we' songs knocked out 70% of our current repertoire. Do we think 'we not me' enough?
- d. Do you think our reverence for the Bible ever blinds us to what it is saying? Look up John 5:39.
- e. In witnessing to our faith we often, and rightly, take time to explain Christian faith and what it means. How might we also offer to people a 'taste and see' approach of Psalm 34:8?
- f. Ashley ended the message by reading the story of a young woman who invited some hippies along to church. Her experience led her to determine that the church can give a counterfeit message, or a true one. How would you define these?

3. Prayers

- * About the counterfeit and the true – that God would lead us to all that is true.
- * About how our community life might be a witness – about how we invite others to 'taste and see'
- * About how we read the Bible together – that in our reverence we also read it with honesty.
- * About removing the barriers to God's family at ABC and how we might extend the boundary.

4. Text of the Message in Full

We not Me Seven – the final one: Extending the Community

It's a Fair Cop



Explain the premise:

Alfie Moore is an ex-copper with Humberside Police – who was based in Scunthorpe.

Nowadays he is a stand-up comedian with his own show on Radio 4 **It's a Fair Cop**.

In each half hour episode he talks the audience through a real-life case, pausing at points to ask the audience what they would do if they were in his shoes. Giving them various options they vote as to what they would do at each stage. But more often than not there is a twist in the story.

They appear at first to be an open and shut cases – the evidence is overwhelming – the perpetrator 'bang to rights' and the audience vote accordingly. But as the story continues and further evidence comes to light the audience comes to realise that they were wrong and the real story, the true story, emerges.

If you do listen to any of them, may I suggest you try '**Malicious Communication**' and see if your jaws drop as Sandra's and mine did when we discovered the truth about what was really happening.

There are Bible stories that mirror what happens in *It's a Fair Cop*. The stories of Ruth, Esther, Rahab, Peter all have something of this 'unlikely outcome' to them.

And one story I have reflected on much over recent years is found in Acts 10&11. It's a story which will help us understand the message for today which is all about **Extending the Community, Barriers, Who is In and Who is Out?**

In Caesarea there was a man named Cornelius, a centurion of the Italian Cohort, as it was called. 2 He was a devout man who feared God with all his household; he gave alms generously to the people and prayed constantly to God. 3 One afternoon at about three o'clock he had a vision in which he clearly saw an angel of God coming in and saying to him, "Cornelius." 4 He stared at him in terror and said, "What is it, Lord?" He answered, "Your prayers and your alms have ascended as a memorial before God. 5 Now send men to Joppa for a certain Simon who is called Peter; 6 he is lodging with Simon, a tanner, whose house is by the seaside."

9 About noon the next day, as they were on their journey and approaching the city, Peter went up on the roof to pray. 10 He became hungry and wanted something to eat; and while it was being prepared, he fell into a trance. 11 He saw the heaven opened and something like a large sheet coming down, being lowered to the ground by its four corners. 12 In it were all kinds of four-footed creatures and reptiles and birds of the air. 13 Then he heard a voice saying, "Get up, Peter; kill and eat."

The first It's a Fair Cop moment

14 But Peter said, "By no means, Lord; for I have never eaten anything that is profane or unclean." 15 The voice said to him again, a second time, "What God has made clean, you must not call profane." 16 This happened three times, and the thing was suddenly taken up to heaven.

The men sent from Cornelius arrive at Peter's house and escort him to Caesarea.

25 On Peter's arrival Cornelius met him, and falling at his feet, worshiped him. 26 But Peter made him get up, saying, "Stand up; I am only a mortal." 27 And as he talked with him, he went in and found that many had assembled; 28 and he said to them, "You yourselves know that it is unlawful for a Jew to associate with or to visit a Gentile; but God has shown me that I should not call anyone profane or unclean. 29 So when I was sent for, I came without objection. Now may I ask why you sent for me?"

34 Then Peter began to speak to them: "I truly understand that God shows no partiality, 35 but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him. 36 You know the message he sent to the people of Israel, preaching peace by Jesus Christ—he is Lord of all.

(This phrase 'Lord of All' or 'Jesus is Lord' became the earliest confession of Christian believers. And Peter shares with them the Gospel – death and resurrection of Jesus.)

42 He commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he is the one ordained by God as judge of the living and the dead. 43 All the prophets testify about him that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name."

44 While Peter was still speaking, the Holy Spirit fell upon all who heard the word. 45 The circumcised believers who had come with Peter were astounded that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on the Gentiles, 46 for they heard them speaking in tongues and extolling God. Then Peter said, 47 "Can anyone withhold the water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?" 48 So he ordered them to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ. Then they invited him to stay for several days.

1 Now the apostles and the believers who were in Judea heard that the Gentiles had also accepted the word of God. 2 So when Peter went up to Jerusalem, the circumcised believers criticized him, 3 saying, "Why did you go to uncircumcised men and eat with them?" **It's a Fair Cop moment two.**

4 Then Peter began to explain it to them, step by step,...

16 And I remembered the word of the Lord, how he had said, 'John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.' 17 If then God gave them the same gift that he gave us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could hinder God?"

It's a Fair Cop moment three

18 When they heard this, they were silenced. And they praised God, saying, "Then God has given even to the Gentiles the repentance that leads to life."

I wonder what was going on inside Peter as these events were taking place? Thinking, internal struggles, self-doubts, inhibitions...

- Doubted himself – it's just a dream – all in my **imagination**.
- It's pandering to **culture** to include the gentiles (perhaps its prejudice to exclude them?)
- I wonder what he thought **theologically** – perhaps I'm going all liberal to include the gentiles.
- **Scripturally** how on earth does this fit with the story and laws of the Old Testament?

I think Peter would have wrestled greatly with these things? And these are, I think, probably the things which we wrestle with today when evaluating the truth, when trying to negotiate our way forward as faithful disciples.

- Is this just me – my mind playing tricks?
- Is this just culture I've become beholden to?
- What is truth here and how do I do the hard work theologically to work it out?
- Scripturally, biblically how does this fit with the whole story of the Bible?

But a new revelation was emerging and the previous enmity and separation between Jews and gentiles was being overturned.

Previously the laws were that they should not **eat** or **be in** each other's homes. And yet in just a few years Paul would be rebuking those who still separated themselves.

In one account, Galatians 2, Paul tells how Cephas got it all wrong.

Cephas used to eat with gentiles – the right and enlightened thing to do for believers – but then a group came from James and told Cephas off – told him to separate himself from eating with gentiles. So he did.

Paul tells Cephas **-What a hypocrite!**

Tells him off and says **get eating with those gentiles again**. It reads:

11 But when Cephas came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he stood self-condemned; 12 for until certain people came from James, he used to eat with the Gentiles. But after they came, he drew back and kept himself separate for fear of the circumcision faction. 13 And the other Jews joined him in this hypocrisy, so that even Barnabas was led astray by their hypocrisy. 14 But when I saw that they were not acting consistently with the truth of the gospel...

So when we fail to welcome and include, we fail to be the church which God intended, that Jesus taught and the New Testament models for us.

There is something **indiscriminate** about Christian living.

It's there in what Paul writes:

There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus. And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to the promise. Gal 3:28 & 29

This series on community – ‘We not Me’ has been something of a revelation to me. Preparing these messages has changed my thinking.

It has shown me just how much I need to look at faith and Christian living with corporate, community eyes – I’ve been off track.

So as I read the Bible I read it as:

- A story of a loving and gracious God – not an angry and harsh God.
- I read it as the story of God’s saving work – winning the world back to himself
- I read it as a story where love wins and where God will one day restore heaven and earth.
- And now, more than ever, I read it as a story not for me, or for you... but for us.

This Bible is a story is more about how **we live together** than how I live on my own – so it is not simply about right beliefs, but right living – with others.

And I/we hold this book very dearly and rightly so. And holding it dearly affects **how** we read it – we don’t want to ignore it, or play around with it, or belittle it.

But just like with Peter and Cornelius, sometimes I wonder if our reverence for it, actually stops us at times from reading it properly and hearing from God through it.

For example, we know that when Paul writes to the church in Corinth – there are a catalogue of defective practices which he is addressing.

Two of them are found in chapter 11 The first it is about defective worship to God

5 but any woman who prays or prophesies with her head unveiled disgraces her head—it is one and the same thing as having her head shaved.

There it is, plain as day - any woman here not wearing a hat can’t pray when we gather.

But of course that is not wrong, because this is something specific to the situation Paul is addressing and not generic for the church for all time. This is why we must be so careful not to lose sight of what God is saying, because we have so high a view of the Bible.

The other matter in 1 Corinthians 11 is about how believers share Communion.

Community living – We not Me – fundamentally involves eating together – it’s a hugely important theme in the Bible. And Paul writes about this, saying in 1 Corinthians 11

... when you come together as a church, I hear that there are divisions among you; and to some extent I believe it. 19 Indeed, there have to be factions among you, for only so will it become clear who among you are genuine.

20 When you come together, it is not really to eat the Lord’s supper. 21 For when the time comes to eat, each of you goes ahead with your own supper, and one goes hungry and another becomes drunk. 22 What! Do you not have homes to eat and drink in?

Because there aren’t church buildings in those days – the believers are meeting in homes: homes where there are **shared worship meals** –the Lord’s Supper.

The issue is that they are sharing these worship meals in a disrespectful way –

- Individuals are bothering only about their own share of food and not what others will have to eat
- Some are going hungry
- Some get at the wine so much they leave the worship meal drunk

So Paul is writing to address these very practical matters.

So what do you think it means when Paul writes...

27 Whoever, therefore, eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord **in an unworthy manner** will be answerable for the body and blood of the Lord. 28 Examine yourselves, and only then eat of the bread and drink of the cup. 29 For all who eat and drink without discerning the body, eat and drink judgment against themselves.

For years I have thought this was the little holy suitability test. Am I internally sinful, what have I done which may exclude me from the meal, can I ask for forgiveness and therefore be okay to receive the food?

(I bow and pray and try to be contrite).

And whilst that in a sense is no bad thing, that's not what the passage is about. It's about how we live together, how I live with you lot.

Because if I don't recognise the body before me, if I don't concern myself with you, recognise your needs, meet your needs where I can, support you and be supported by you.... then I eat and drink judgement against myself.

One writer puts it this way –

'When these attitudes to one another do not reflect the Christ-like pouring out of their lives for each other that lies at the heart of the meal, they are 'guilty of drinking the cup and eating the bread in an unworthy manner'.

How does Paul summarise this?

33 So then, my brothers and sisters, when you come together to eat, wait for one another. 34 If you are hungry, eat at home, so that when you come together, it will not be for your condemnation.

Make sense?

V SLOW - This also means that sharing communion is way more than **remembering the past** – its an aid to show us how we should **live in the present**.

As Christmas approaches we are obviously hitting Christmas market time.

Wandering around in the chilly night air, clutching a hot cup of glühwein, considering whether to buy the scented candle or the painted wooden soldier?

One of the challenges of the Christmas market is negotiating the stalls where not only can you see and assess the products on sale, not only can you read something about them – signs saying olive wood from the Holy Land – wool from reindeer etc, but where the seller is actually offering a taster, a sample of his wares – cheese, a spirit, stollen cake.

What do you do? Do you:

- a. Smile a politely decline the taster.
- b. Smile accept the taster and buy.
- c. Or the very hardest option, taste then don't buy!

Psalm 34

8 O taste and see that the Lord is good;

So it's how we welcome and include people, how we share communion together, how we enable people to experience 'taste and see' and not just 'know and understand' that expresses and witnesses to the life we have.

Which make perfect sense when you realise that being a Christian is not simply assenting to a set of beliefs, but it is joining a community of believers.

So we extend the community and remove the barriers and give people a taste of what salvation and faith looks like, feels like.

Alpha Course – share faith – looking at running another course in the New Year.

Sessions – go through story of Jesus – Christian faith explained.

Of course there is a meal – but that is explained, and I’ve always understood that the meal is simply to provide a relaxed and conversational atmosphere in which conversation can take place and discussions had about the subject.

But I reckon old Nicky Gumble has missed a trick here.

I reckon does he not realise that the meal actually gives people a chance not just to **think** about Christian faith, but to actually **experience** it.

- The grace with which people speak
- The generosity of what they provide
- The honesty about life’s struggles, faith, failures
- The kindness in their attentiveness and in listening

So we come to an end of ‘We not Me’ as a series and I dearly hope not as a practice.

As I said – it has had a profound impact on my understanding of how we are called not simply into a set of beliefs, but into a community of believers. I think that community is wide and welcome, open and inclusive and like Paul there is something hypocritical when we erect barriers.

In my reading this week I read a passage from a book by a famous preacher and author about her early experiences as a Christian back in the 70’s, which perhaps go some way to summing all this up. She wrote this:

‘At sixteen... people I knew were discovering sex and smoking marijuana. Life as I knew it was spinning out of control and I was looking for handles. I wanted to know what was right and what was wrong, how to live an honourable life and avoid trouble. I wanted to know how to get on God’s good side and stay there and the Baptist Church promised to tell me all these things. It was an offer I could not refuse. Under the influence of my red-headed best friend and her older brother, upon whom I had designs, I answered a call one summer’s evening and was baptised by immersion soon afterward.

I was saved, but even before I could learn all the rules that would keep me saved, I ran afoul of them.

Believing what the preacher said about how the church was a house of prayer for all people, I brought two hippies with me to that house one Wednesday night – runaways I had picked up hitchhiking on the road – and soon found myself banished along with them. It was a crushing revelation, but a revelation nonetheless. I absolutely knew that there was something to this Jesus-God business, and I knew with equal clarity that what I had just experienced was not it. Recognising that I had been handed a counterfeit - set me free to seek the real thing, and I never looked back.’