

Something happens when you become a parent. In a way, you disappear and between you and me, there is grieving involved. It doesn't not matter whether you are father or mother, you feel something of the 'you' slip into the past and it is disturbing. The 'you' that you knew is replaced by a fierce love for a tiny, vulnerable creature. You will never be the same and from now on you will be renamed, the unnamed, 'Greg's mother' or 'Susan's Dad' – not the wild thing you once were.

And then there comes a time when we are told, there is a time when if we really love them, we have to let them go. Great joy is almost always underpinned with some sorrow.

Acts is the stories of the early church. Well, not a church – a movement. They called themselves people on the way. It was seen as a natural extension of the Jewish story on an even greater pilgrimage; A 2nd journey to a different promised land – the Kingdom of God. It was a way of discovery and like parenting, every time they had to let go of something, they changed – and no doubt, there was sorrow as they left things behind.

Acts is a series of stories that show again and again that the Spirit of God was active and unpredictable. The dreams of Peter and Paul for building a movement were constantly updated by the Spirit. Peter and Paul were confronted with their assumptions and prejudices and where they mistook rules for faith, they were shattered. The Spirit moved ahead of them and broke down every barrier.

There was one rule – love one another as I have loved you. All the others were not as important.

People believed that this was a new movement led by a Jewish teacher for Jewish people. God had other ideas.

It was not a 'church' – a sect, perhaps, but not a new faith.

The idea of a movement fills Deacons with glee as there were no walls and no buildings. It was (and is) an idea and as such, is organic and uncontrollable. It spread like honey. Even the Romans couldn't stop it because it wasn't anywhere – it was everywhere.

Last week, we talked about the Eunuch – a person not acceptable in the Temple but acceptable to God. Phillip baptised him because he knew Jesus' love was not about who was inside the tent and who was outside. Who were the sheep in the paddock – and who were the sheep elsewhere? God knows them all. In truth, the shepherd cannot – unless the shepherd *is* God.¹

Peter, in previous chapters, urged followers to stick to the Jewish rules, especially on cleanliness and uncleanness. He did not see this movement as a revolution but as new growth in Jewish faith.

It is no wonder that in this reading, Peter worries about how he can complete his mission. The Spirit has called him here. We know that keeping rituals is such an important part of Jewish worship. Remember, it wasn't enough to stay away from certain foods, and to ritually wash and pray before breaking bread or pouring wine– you were not allowed to actually sit at a gentile's table. Just as some orthodox Muslims today struggle to shake hands with a woman, some Jews were not allowed to be touched by a gentile. They certainly could not accept their hospitality. These were the RULES!!! Peter was invited to Cornelius' house. How was he going to manage it?

But as I said last week, love over rules.

Cornelius was known all over the Empire for his good works. He was a man of deep faith and just like in the story of Phillip, here was an opportunity for two people to have a conversation about their beliefs – what drove them.

I sometimes wonder what would have happened if Peter didn't have the courage to have a frank conversation with a gentile? In today's world, how often do we stop ourselves?

Early in the movement, there was dispute amongst the leaders as to whether Gentiles had to convert to Judaism (and be circumcised) or whether there was another way. Several paths were on offer including a partial conversion where there would be one set of laws for Gentiles and Mosaic law reserved for hereditary Jews. These were important conversations much like the ones that created the Basis of Union.

¹ I am the sheep dog, not the shepherd

A fledgling movement has to have good order. Otherwise, it becomes chaos and exploitation. I can't help but think of the snake handling churches in the Deep South and the millionaire tele-evangelists.

A child without boundaries is unmanageable and every adult around them pays the price. But then parenting requires us to look at the rules we grew up with and decide which are important; which are outdated and which are restrictive for all the wrong reasons. Raising a child is a balancing act between creative expression and social boundaries; allowing movement and growth and keeping them safe and on a path. We are constantly reassessing 'acceptable', stretching and renegotiating our own principles.

The Spirit is alive in every story in Acts. Shaking old ways, opening doors and creating opportunities for shared experiences. These are the stories about gathering the faithful no matter what their colour, ability, gender, occupation or ethnicity. The Spirit keeps putting the Disciples in the path of people of great faith: the Eunuch, the Centurion, Lydia on and on and on each occasion, the Disciple is challenged and they are both changed². They are learning from each other.

The circumcised believers who had come with Peter were astonished that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on Gentiles. ⁴⁶ For they heard them speaking in tongues^[a] and praising God.³

And like Phillip, Peter decided, ⁴⁷ "Surely no one can stand in the way of their being baptized They have received the Holy Spirit just as we have."

How quickly we moved from no doors, to buildings, to rules of who is in and who is out.

Gay, straight, it doesn't matter. A child is born with a spirit and no matter what your intentions, they will be who they are – and you, the parent, no matter what you believe or what your prejudices might be – are changed by that experience. Old ideas fall away. Our children grow us too

² Along with their companions and ultimately, the movement

³ Could it be that they heard them praising God in their own tongues just as you and I hear the Lord's prayer even when it is being said in a different language?

And yes, there was joy – and sorrow.

The question of who's in the tent and who's out started from the beginning. Oh, how the Jewish believers were amazed! (no bias there! Huh?) ... And sometime since then, it happened, again, that a friendship with Jesus gave some people membership to this privileged club and others not. When the movement moved into buildings, was that when they slammed the doors?

When did we stop dreaming⁴ as Peter did when looking to God for answers?

The stories in Acts are Spirit led. (In case you haven't noticed, I've said that before. The Spirit redirected the movement again and again into fresh initiatives of unbridled and unpredictable growth. The message again, like parenting, is a call to loving faithfulness – with all its joy and sorrows, we will be changed. We are a pilgrim people.

Happy Parents day!

May the Spirit lead us into conversations.

I pray

Creator Spirit, dance in our hearts today. Change us. Grow us through many conversations. Help me understand when to hold tight and when to let go. Amen.

⁴ and began to take the word of medieval writers and artists as Gospel?