

17.5.2017 St John with St Mark, Bury
Acts 15:1-6. John 15:1-8.

Our reading from the Acts of the Apostles introduces us to one of the great questions of the Early Church. Indeed, a question which is still with us and of which we are products. Some believers claim that to be saved a Christian must be circumcised according to the custom (not Law, a fine but crucial distinction) of Moses. This is, implicitly, on top of baptism. These believers are opposed by Paul and Barnabas and the entire row is taken to the apostles and elders in Jerusalem. And at that meeting there are some believers who are also of the Pharisees who agree that circumcision should be employed.

Our reading ended with the apostles and elders considering the matter.

Now the question is vital and crucial for the nature of the Church. It is the most important question asked of the Early Church and of us. If Gentile, non-Jewish believers must be circumcised, that implies that the Church is essentially a ginger-group in Judaism. To agree with this means that the Church must remain small, insignificant, on the edge of things. If Gentiles were to be accepted as themselves with just baptism to welcome them into the fellowship of Christ's religion, this implies a Church with no boundaries, and open acceptance and welcome and a Church that creates a new centre of being for the world's history. If we must circumcise Gentiles, then we are operating with very narrow boundaries. If we just welcome Gentiles as they are, then our boundaries are wide open. This is the question. And it tears apart the Early Church.

But there is a moment of grace. No...let me rephrase this. There is an explosion of grace. Paul and Barnabas are absolutely right to reject the idea of circumcision and to argue for welcome. They kick open the doors. They win their argument and the Early Church welcomes Gentiles. Gentiles are welcomed with baptism and asked to refrain from eating blood. Black Puddings are out. They are also asked not to eat meat offered to idols, or strangled and to avoid fornication. The point is won. Gentiles are to be welcomed in.

That means that you and I can become fully accepted members of the body of Christ and find our place in the community of the faithful. Without Paul and Barnabas arguing the case of welcome, we would have remained outside the community of the faithful. Without that explosion of grace the Church would have remained a small Jewish pressure group. With the explosion of grace the Church becomes a movement and community that can take on the world and win and be that world-wide community that it now is. The Anglican Communion, of which we are a part, stretched from Europe, across the Americas, to Asia and Africa. We are a world-wide communion.

We need to be open and embracing to be faithful to our calling and our history. In the current church, the panic over numbers has led us to wilfully walk away from differing forms of mission. Number-evangelism is seen as being the only issue. I would say that of critical importance is how we learn to live as a minority religion with neighbours of the faithful in other religions, particularly in our parish with our Muslim brothers and sisters, fellow believers in the God of Abraham. We need to address the issues of poverty and class distinction. We need to see God in communities outside the Church and ask how we might work with them. Number-evangelism should be a priority but only one amongst many. We should not be shutting out other voices, yet that is what is happening.

Let us rejoice in the explosion of grace. Let us give thanks that this allows us, welcomes us into the community of the faithful. Let us rejoice in the open boundaries this explosion brings. Amen.