

Everything Necessary for Salvation (Acts 11:1-19)

10:00am Holy Communion –Sunday 18th May 2025

John 13:31-35

When he had gone out, Jesus said, ‘Now the Son of Man has been glorified, and God has been glorified in him. If God has been glorified in him, God will also glorify him in himself and will glorify him at once. Little children, I am with you only a little longer. You will look for me; and as I said to the Jews so now I say to you, “Where I am going, you cannot come.” I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.’

Acts 11:1-18

Now the apostles and the believers who were in Judea heard that the Gentiles had also accepted the word of God. So when Peter went up to Jerusalem, the circumcised believers criticized him, saying, ‘Why did you go to uncircumcised men and eat with them?’ Then Peter began to explain it to them, step by step, saying, ‘I was in the city of Joppa praying, and in a trance I saw a vision. There was something like a large sheet coming down from heaven, being lowered by its four corners; and it came close to me. As I looked at it closely I saw four-footed animals, beasts of prey, reptiles, and birds of the air. I also heard a voice saying to me, “Get up, Peter; kill and eat.” But I replied, “By no means, Lord; for nothing profane or unclean has ever entered my mouth.” But a second time the voice answered from heaven, “What God has made clean, you must not

call profane.” This happened three times; then everything was pulled up again to heaven.

At that very moment three men, sent to me from Caesarea, arrived at the house where we were. The Spirit told me to go with them and not to make a distinction between them and us. These six brothers also accompanied me, and we entered the man’s house. He told us how he had seen the angel standing in his house and saying, “Send to Joppa and bring Simon, who is called Peter; he will give you a message by which you and your entire household will be saved.” And as I began to speak, the Holy Spirit fell upon them just as it had upon us at the beginning. 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.” 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?’

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.’

<Prayer>

In 1562 the bishops of the Church of England, and therefore all of the clergy, accepted a set of statements which ever since have called the *Articles of Religion*. Those statements are part of the ground-level definition of what the Church of England *believes* in certain important aspects. Taken together they define the point of separation between what we now call Anglicanism, and the Roman Catholic Church (as it was at that time). If you can remember your history, the great split began with Henry VIII, who broke away from the Pope and made himself the head of the church.

In total there are 39 articles of religion, and if you wish you can look them up in the Book of Common Prayer. There is a great deal I could say about each of them, but that would be far too much for a single sermon. I have often thought about creating a Lent course to cover the history and definition of Anglicanism, which might be a good aim for next year. ***A working title for that might be: ‘what does the church of England believe?’***

I would however like to draw your attention to one of the articles, which is very important. We shall find that it rings true in the light of today’s first reading from the Book of Acts. It’s article *number 6* from the full list of 39 and it says this: *Holy Scripture (the Bible) contains **everything that is necessary for salvation**, so that whatever cannot be read therein, or proved by it, must not be required of any person to be believed as an article of the Faith, or be thought necessary for salvation.*

This is a clear and binary statement which says that nothing outside of scripture can be held as *necessary for you* to be saved by the work of salvation in Christ, and to inherit eternal life. If you pick up a Bible, take it out, give it to someone, then you have given them 100% of all which is necessary to discover and achieve salvation for themselves. The message of scripture can be read, it can be taken to heart, it can be lived, and it can deliver a person *by their own attention*, into the grace of God for all eternity. God has made himself known, he has shown his power in creation and his love for us, he has shown his priority above all things, and he has invited us to have a relationship with him that will define how we live our lives. **The Bible contains all such simple truths that can lead a person to salvation, as well as telling many stories of how that plays-out in the lives of real people.**

<pause>

Today we are looking at a very important story of real life, from the Book of Acts chapter 11. The scene is a kind of council meeting – known the council of Jerusalem. The leaders of the early church are gathered to hear about how God is working around them and through them. **On that day it became clear to them that something new and very special was happening, by God's action and the outpouring of his Holy Spirit.** This is how it begins:

Now the apostles and the believers who were in Judea heard that the Gentiles had also accepted the word of God. So when Peter went up to Jerusalem, the circumcised believers criticized him, saying, 'Why did you go to uncircumcised men and eat with them?'

So, you have the Jew followers of Jesus (here referred to as the circumcised) and the Gentiles (meaning everyone believing in anything else). Or to put it another way – the pure people of God (as they styled themselves), and the pagans. **In its earliest days the first church might have thought of themselves like a *reform* to Judaism - God was trying to reform *his* relationship with *his* people through *his* Messiah.** But that would be too limited for the whole world and certainly not include all that other lot – the great unwashed – the Gentiles. Yes, the gentiles could convert to being Jews, but there were difficulties with that, and a high personal cost involved - according to all the religious and legal requirements that someone had to take on. God wanted to address the whole of creation through Christ, whom he sent to bring all people to himself.

So, before the council, Peter is recounting his recent *miraculous* experience which seemed to challenge everything they thought God was doing through them. Peter had been in the coastal town of Joppa, having just visited and healed a sick lady called Dorcas (as we heard from Victoria last week). At the same time a certain God-fearing man called Cornelius, who was a Roman centurion living in Caesarea (about 30 miles to the north of Joppa), sees an angel of the Lord and was told to send for Peter in Joppa. Cornelius would not have been clear as to who Peter was, or why he was being sent for.

This is what Peter said to the council: ‘**When I was on the rooftop praying, I saw a vision. There was something like a large sheet coming down from heaven, being lowered by its four corners. As I looked, I saw four-footed animals, beasts of prey, reptiles, and birds of the air. I also heard a voice saying to me, “Get up, Peter; kill and eat.” But I replied, “By no means, Lord; for nothing profane or unclean has ever entered my mouth.” But a second time the voice answered from heaven, “What God has made clean, you must not call profane.”** I’m sure you understand, most of what Peter had been shown and told he can eat is outside of the Jewish food laws and considered profane. Yet now God says, these things are clean.

Just then from Caesarea some men arrived, collected Peter, and they all headed back to Cornelius’s house. When they get there, Peter felt that God’s Holy Spirit was telling him: ‘**To go into the house with them and do not to make a distinction between them and us.**’ Cornelius then told Peter of what he was shown in his own vision: ‘**Send to Joppa and bring Simon, who is called Peter; he will give you a message by which you and your entire household will be saved.**’

According to Peter's telling of these events to the council in Jerusalem. 'And as I began to speak, the Holy Spirit fell upon them all just as it had upon the apostles at Pentecost. And I remembered the word of the Lord, saying "John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit." If then God gave *Cornelius and the gentiles* the same gift that he gave us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, then who was I that I could hinder God?' So Peter baptises them all – all gentiles.

'When the council in Jerusalem heard all this, they were silenced. They praised God, saying, 'Then God has given even to the Gentiles the repentance that leads to life.'

<pause>

Now remember that Article 6, for the Church of England. It makes clear **those things which are necessary for salvation.**

The reason it was written was to keep the church from creating *other withholding factors* that then set the church leadership as *gatekeepers to salvation*. Supposing I said: *Unless you pay a tax to the church, then you will not receive absolution for you sins, and therefore you shall not inherit eternal life!* That would be a terrible spiritual abuse. Nothing and no one are beyond salvation, and all can seek God in the Holy Scriptures to find a new and holy way for their lives. **We are God's servants, not God's gatekeepers. It's why you hear me often talk of the great importance in the church of good welcome and hospitality.**

Everything which the church does, by its ministry and it's worship, must stand a test of it's point *according to scripture*. We can read therein: '**Love the Lord you God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength, and love your neighbour as yourself**'.

The work of the church, and my job here, is to help you to do that together. I draw us towards Christ for salvation, and to support us towards serving in the community – all who are our neighbours. At the same time, I try to remove any barriers or distractions that prevent us from doing so. Therein we shall find **‘everything which is necessary for salvation’**, for ourselves and to help others find the same through us.

The Christian faith is not complicated nor inaccessible. Yet the weight of history and the thickness of your Bible can make it seem so. What speaks loudest is the conduct of your lives in witness to God, and the love you share. In fact, I would go as far as to say that through us, anyone can find the path to salvation for themselves.

Amen